

The Conceptualised Chronicles of Stranger Things by **xTheo**

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Summary: Hidden powers discovered, hard battles fought and won, the return of everyone's favourite telekinetic girl and some interesting new characters to add to the mix. Things were bound to get stranger in the small town of Hawkins, Indiana... Update Monday 06/02/2017 starts at Chapter 34 :)

1. Chapter 1

Monday 26th March, 1984

It was a night like any other in Hawkins, Indiana. While all the houses were quiet, tiny stores dark and residents in slumber, nothing out of the ordinary should have been detected. Subsequently, all typical young boys should have been found safely dreaming in warm beds, of normal things like school and sports and maybe the occasional adventure with magic and superheroes.

Will Byers however, was not a typical young boy, at least, not anymore. No more fantastic adventures and happy go lucky dreams for Will Byers, no. Where he found himself, trapped in a recurring nightmare yet again, was atypical to all but him...

It was just like home, but darker...

Emptier...

A ubiquitous cold sucked every ounce of warmth from his body, left him immobile, unable to breathe. The Vale of Shadows, better known as the upside-down, with its sickly atmosphere and unknown substances covering everything. It was a world littered with creatures seeking to rip his insides out and feed on them, to use him as a host body...

From the ceiling the shadows grew, looming down towards him like the long, hairy legs of a giant black-widow spider. His asphyxiation grew, body convulsed, mouth opened barely to let out an inaudible scream...

Thrashing amongst tangled sheets in a cold sweat, Will pushed himself upwards with raspy breaths and the oh so familiar need to puke. "NO!" he cried out weakly, voice cracking as he struggled against the covers. "STOP!"

Not ten seconds later the bedroom door was thrown open to reveal the silhouette of a young man, his older brother Jonathan.

"Will! Are you okay, did something happen?" he called out into the darkness, waiting for the overhead light to flicker on permanently.

Jonathan scanned the room on entering, taking in the pallid boy and stripped bed with a confirming nod before pulling his small, shuddering figure into a half hug. "No danger buddy, just another bad dream right?"

"Y-y-yeah, just a n-nightmare." Will replied, wiping his eyes before getting up and heading for the bathroom with Jonathan trailing behind him.

Moonlight reflecting off the white sink basin lit the grimy mirror from below as he took in his washed out reflection. A twilight of their unlit bathroom showed him where to lean, for he couldn't bear to see the sick clearly as his body convulsed. The familiar black slug in dark green sludge crawled its way up his throat, immediately squirming its way toward the drain when he spit.

Jonathan could only stand by helplessly as he seemingly dry-retched, benighted to Will's troubles. He played his part on auto, waiting until the boy stopped with a mouth rinsed of imaginary vomit before leading him back to his own bedroom.

Dim lamp-light cast a warm glow across the room, highlighting boxes of vinyl and tape records and an eclectic assortment of books scattered across the table dragged to his bed, a pseudo-desk. The sweet sounds of Joy Division lulled the young boy as he enthralled in the inviting atmosphere.

Under his brother's covers, Will shut his eyes and curled up as close to the opposite side as possible, giving Jonathan room to resume absorbing his AP chemistry notes. "Need a glass of water or something?" Jonathan asked, bemoaning the schoolwork in favour of a procrastinate task.

"I'm okay." Will mumbled back, pulling the older boy to lie down with him. "You should sleep."

Jonathan chuckled tiredly, "Fine, as long as you do too."

Exhaustion seeped into her bones with every step alongside the 2am chill, as a weary-eyed Joyce made her way home. In a brisk walk from the pinto she scrabbled through her purse for the keys, hushing the howling Benny even before unlocking the front door.

"Down boy! You know it's me." Benny huffed as she pushed away his inquisitive wet snout, returning to his favourite spot on the living room couch timidly. Joyce sighed, "Not that I can blame you, I've been a stranger to this house lately..."

Joyce dropped her purse by the hound and made her way to Will's room. Not unusually, his bed was empty and the sheets were bundled up in a ball on the ground. She retraced her steps to the closed door over and knocked lightly, letting the soft music drift out of his room as she pushed it open and peeked in.

"Jonathan?"

Said boy heard his name being murmured in the familiar maternal tone and rolled over to face his mother. "Hey mom. How was your night?"

"Well, I didn't see any familiar names on the register. So it was good... was he sick again?" she inquired, leaning over to stroke her youngest sons hair back. "Yeah, not as bad as last week though... with the fits. He went straight back to sleep this time. You look really tired Mom, there's dinner in the microwave and I can come make you coffee before you go down." Jonathan offered, his hushed whispers leaving the slumbering boy undisturbed.

Joyce shook her head fondly. "Stay there, you know I'll nod off right after eating. Thanks again for watching him." She took in the mirrored features of her sons one last time, mahogany bowl cuts already in desperate need of trimming again, limpid eyes against pale faces turned in parallel towards her, before backing out again.

Bird-like hands shook as she leaned against the kitchen counter, away from the humming microwave. Her face scrunched up in deep thought, she didn't notice the ding of reheated spaghetti while mulling over the banal events of that night at her second job, and more importantly, the ways in which her sons could be kept safe,

healthy and happy.

She'd done what she had to, the skeleton shifts as a hospital-receptionist congruent with her day-job at the general store. It meant a healthy income that kept her family afloat, time freed to Jonathan so he could focus on school...

And it meant the medical bills for Will's mysterious and recurring illnesses were covered, as they sought to figure out what was wrong with him.

Joyce was prepared for her youngest to come back with a chip on his shoulder, several chips even. But a huge chunk of pain and desecration in place of the second sweet soul she still marvelled at having borne returned, one that could only be healed with time and love in abundance.

They loathed to figure out, two months on from their journey to the alternate dimension and successful retrieval mission, that the trauma would take more than simple time and love to mend.

He'd tried to hide it at first, the retching, the glimpses of another world. But it revealed itself late one night when she came home to find him collapsed on the bathroom tiles in a state of hysteria.

The small circle of confidants from that harrowing week in November last year were far from over the ordeal, Joyce knew this for sure. She couldn't be the only one still suffering, even if her personal past, plagued with anxiety and emotional disarray, elevated her own dysfunction.

Her sons trauma was in a whole other league though, one that passed the boundaries of her own experience and left her and Jonathan bereft of what to do. Sometimes he'd be too sick to leave the house for school, glued to his bed in paralysis as her or her oldest dragged numerous physicians, one time even a catholic priest, to diagnose him for clues to a cure.

Upon waking of his own volition to bated breaths released by his family, Will got to listen with them as each doctor explained that physically, there was nothing wrong with him. And what he was

experiencing was more of the psychiatric nature... not that they weren't already aware, of both things.

He refused to speak to a psychologist though, and Joyce couldn't disagree with that, because what he'd experienced... well, no doctor could ever stomach his story without prescribing a heavy dosage of diazepam and lecture on mastering one's own mind, triggering Joyce as she recalled her own time with the shrink.

Joyce wondered with growing disheartenment what they could possibly do now to make things better. Short of a time machine, reverting her family back to a period six months ago when all they had was a deadbeat ex/father and a few measly bills on their plate seemed an impossibility...

This time, he got to experience Jonathan's bedroom come to death. Noxious fumes coated the back of his throat as he curled up in a corner and suffocated from the atmosphere. Nightmarish creatures looped around the broken bed frame and out of the shattered windows draped in tattered rags.

The biting cold chilled his fingers into clumsy numbness, cold seeped into his toes and spread painfully throughout his feet as if they lay on ice rather than snug in the thick socks he swore he put on before bed. He lost all sense of time here, had it been minutes or hours since he closed his eyes? Was it time to open them and stop pretending to be asleep yet?

The frigid yet stale air continued to nip at him as he curled up even tighter in his lonely corner. The shrieks of hunting predators and shadows loomed past the gaping holes in Jonathan's sham of a bedroom. Echoes Will wished so dearly to return to the source of bounced off the walls, calling to him. Jamming his arms over his head, he screamed at them "SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!"

"GO AWAY, I HATE YOU, I HATE THIS PLACE!"

"I want to sleep... let me die..." he silently begged the voices, his friends and family, the merciful gods above to pull him out of this hell.

2. Chapter 2

She didn't feel there, in the between world...

Her physical body was in disconnect with the mortal plane, sense diminished alongside its existence. This new world crossed a void from the upside right with no bridge leading back. Everything was nothing, no sound, no light, no smell...

Weightless... drifting across the dark matte, not unlike the bath bereft the nudge of water current and bubbles against her skin. She knew less about this empty than the upside down, isolation in its very essence...

At least, in the back of her mind, there was the hope that Papa would still be on the other side of the tank waiting for her...

El found nothing, nothing beyond the imagined place of her limbs. Where she pictured them to be, they were. Her body was there and it was alive and surrounding... her. It was moving alive because she was alive...

Was she alive? Was she still Eleven who listened for Papa, El who learned about a life beyond sterile walls from Mike and stopped the demogorgon from hurting her friends?

Why was she here, floating in nothing, when she could be with Dustin and Lucas, the boys who cared, and Mike her friend not brother in the real world?

She thought she was Eleven, or El for short. She thought she should be able to hear, and see and feel. She thought it was dark, this world, and that she could hear, if she tried really hard, because listening was her gift.

And she was gifted, she was El...

3. Chapter 3

Thursday 29th March, 1984

As the large faced clock above ticked down the minutes left until his english class ended, proclaim of the thematic importance of Lord of the Flies permeated the room while students spread the spectrum from rapt attention paid on their teacher to puddling drool on the novels they headed...

Mike Wheeler could hold no privy to the information his classmates took note of, preferring to stare out the window in retrospective attempt. Sadly, every new day was chipping off a piece from his fading memory of November last year...

It all started when one of his best friends, Will, was taken by a monster they dubbed the demogorgon to a different dimension. To call them crazy wouldn't be an unfair judgement, but you really had to be there...

That first night he and his friends snuck out on an impromptu search for Will. They discovered a girl instead, shivering and rain soaked in the forest with her hair shaved off...

His faith in her aptness to help them find Will, broken then promptly mended when she revealed the dead boy found in the quarry bogus with his voice on a shaky radio signal. Eleven, or El for short, with the mysterious past and power to move things only with her mind...

Government funded conspirators chased them in electricians vans but they escaped on their bikes. The demogorgon cornered them in their science classroom...

And the girl, El, exploded into a million pieces of black dust alongside the monster. She sacrificed herself for all of them, something Mike would never be able to forgive himself for letting happen...

A returned Will later described to him the upside down as a rotting graveyard in permanent state of nightfall, colder than anything ever

was in Hawkins no matter the time. With misshapen creatures he'd only ever be able to make up in their favourite fantasy game...

El was likely there, reasoned the dejected boys. Mike, Lucas and Dustin conspired ways and places to look for her, with Will's help. But valiant attempts of checking the vast expanse of forest every weekend came up short...

Four months had passed already, and they were back to their boring lives without yet a solid clue as to her whereabouts. Not that that was deterring them from looking still...

We should have taken a photo to remember her with... thought Mike, idly bending the already dog eared pages of his novel. And compare... her hair should be longer, but the dress is probably shredded... better take another one from Nancy's closet, she probably grew... I hope El found food there...

The thought of a rare, crooked smile and huge hazel eyes focussed unabashedly on him elicited the goofy grin that Mike Wheeler would never otherwise procure. After El returned and came to his house for all the eggos she wanted, as promised, he'd pull her into frame before Mom snapped his annual portrait. Then they'd have her on print forever...

A stinging flick to his ear prompted Mike to gasp at his right side, immediately in annoyance at Dustin's questioning gaze and waving hand.

"What?" he growled.

"Just checking you were still on planet Earth..." he replied, the corner of his mouth lifting with one eyebrow.

Mike rolled his eyes and sighed, "Yes I'm still here..."

"Mr Wheeler, Mr Henderson, do I need to see you two in detention writing out the entire novel by hand?" their teacher snapped with a glare in their direction. "No sir!" they replied together, Mike slumping embarrassed in his seat while Dustin straightened his posture and brandished his pencil once again.

"It is an alternative method to learning the content Wheeler, I won't hesitate to assign you the task..." Mr Anderson warned, pointing a gnarled finger in the troubled boy's direction and shaking his head in disappointment.

Mike mumbled his apology with a bowed head while the students behind him snickered, wishing still that he could be outside, searching for his missing friend instead of here...

For all the good, learning thematic expression in writing that wasn't science-fiction and therefore wasn't remotely interesting, would do him...

After class he and Dustin headed straight to the AV club room with their bagged lunches. Narrowly avoiding eighth grade bullies busy tormenting still too new sixth graders, they found Lucas and Will inside.

Lucas was busy at the hamshack radio, tuning its signals. They'd reached a trucker in Alaska once, but getting as far as Australia was still a pipedream... as well, the unspoken thought of reaching Eleven, wherever she may be, lay forefront in their minds...

Will sat by the window colouring an unidentified picture before Dustin leaned over and Mike saw his eyes widen.

"Holy shit dude, is that me?" Dustin exclaimed, punching his shoulder as he assumed a hovering stance over the nodding boy.

"You like it?" Will asked, finishing the emblem of Dustin the Awesome's shield and grabbing the black felt to outline his heavily armoured body. "I was thinking you could do with a laser-shooter..." he continued, free hand at his chin.

"Oooh, that's what I'm talking 'bout baby! And a bazooka too!" Dustin continued his input as Lucas sighed in defeat. Leaving the radio, he took his sandwich to the other side of the room.

There he sat next to Mike who, judging by the way he picked at his leftover meatloaf without eating it, was in deep contemplation.

"You thinking 'bout how to end the campaign for tomorrow night?"

he asked through bites of ham and egg-salad. "My mom's taking Jamie to visit our sick aunt by the way. It'll be just us and my dad home..."

"Cool. And uuhhh... yeah. Well... actually, I only just started writing it this morning..." Mike admitted with a grimace, turning his head away from Lucas.

"You never leave it this late though!" Lucas proclaimed with his head tilted.

"I know. But... don't worry, I'll figure it out." He assured this by reverting back to Lucas with a quick nod. Their attentions turned to Will, wobbling as he tried to reach up on his toes and stick the picture of Dustin next to the others.

Usually Mike was first to aid him, towering next to the smallest statured boy. But Lucas beat him to the punch, dragging his chair over and propping it so the boy could hang the image himself. A clever tactic on his part for not leaving Will helpless, thought Mike...

Dustin leant back against his desk, pringle can handed, close enough for Mike as he iterated in a hushed voice, "I didn't heard him coughing today, like, at all... and he hasn't puked either apparently..."

"That's awesome! Does he look any different to you than last week?" Mike furthered, averting his eyes when the Byers boy turned towards Lucas, and them, pretending to eat his food.

"Better to me. I mean, less... ghostly?" Dustin offered.

They looked back over to him, standing on the precarious high-chair Lucas held steady. He gave a small cheer as the picture finally stayed, completing their collective party.

Needless to say, they worried about him more than they let on...

A silent pact made. The Byers boy had trusted his friends enough to admit how much he detested being sheltered by his mom and brother, not more than for the simple stress that spiked their already fragile systems. It pained him to pain them, and it hurt them that he

was hurting... even more so that he hid... a vicious cycle.

They trusted him enough to know his own limits in return. Bike races to and from school as ever, now detouring out to Mirkwood so the three could see him safely home before riding back to Maple Street...

And if he had to slow down, so did they without question. Dungeons and Dragons went to his house on sick days and little attention drew to his frequent bathroom breaks...

Will brought over his Peanut Butter and Jelly and ate one half of it. Another good sign, usually he never ate his lunch.

He gave his apple to Dustin, not to want but uneasy of the waste when his mom and brother worked hard to earn his lunch. The room erupted with laughter at Dustin's imitation of grumpy old Mr Anderson...

Lucas, Dustin and Mike agreed silently that things were looking up for the now chortling Will's condition...

4. Chapter 4

Will arrived home to a familiar chevvy truck topped with police sirens parked out front...

Frowning, he pulled up beside the vehicle. Its windows were locked and tinted, but peering in closely he saw a large, rectangular, black case inside...

Cases like that were only meant to hold guns, like the air rifle Dad left behind locked in the shed.

"I'm home..." Will called out as he tumbled through the front door into the muted excitement of his favourite canine, "Hey Benny."

"Honey! I thought you were going straight to Lucas's house tonight..." Joyce answered, coming from the kitchen into the sitting room.

Will could feel the nervous energy radiating from her. Patting the family dog, he casually explained, "I left my dice here, just gonna find them and ride over later."

"Well, that's fine. How was your day?" his mother inquired, smoothing back the too long bangs across his forehead with cool hands.

Heavy footsteps from the hallway impelled them to turn as Chief Hopper entered the scene. He smiled lazily, watching as Will plopped down beside his bag on the living room sofa. The boy took note of the stack of folders tucked under his arm but kept his face stoic.

"How's it going Will?" the chief asked, looking between mother and son but ignoring the worried glance Joyce shot back at him.

"Okay, I guess..." Will replied. He smelt the cigarette and coffee breath from across the room, observed the bedraggled appearance of wrinkled clothes and scraggly beard. Looks like sleep wasn't coming easy to him either.

Will didn't ask how long the chief had been there, but a quick glance in the ashtrays would confirm his suspicion it was probably as long as

his school day. His mom only ever smoked when he was around after all...

"Hopper here just... came over to see how you were doing." Joyce explained, looking to him pointedly.

"Yeah, kid. Just wanted to know if there's uhh... anything I can do? About, y'know..." the silent plead of guidance at Joyce was all Will needed to see the discrepancy.

"I feel like... that's not actually why you're here, chief."

Immediately after these words left his mouth the adults stilled. "What... what are you talking about, kid?" carefully asked Hopper. He moved towards Joyce with his arms crossed, wishing she'd stop giving herself away with her anxious face and fidgeting. "Sweetie, what makes you say that?"

Better to just get it out of the way and tell them, right? He thought, looking to the shaggy fur he stroked and taking a calming breath. "Mom, I know Chief Hopper is here, like, almost every day while I'm at school..."

He heard Joyce gulp as a fluttering hand went up to her throat. "Okay, is there anything else?" Hopper queried, shifting from foot to foot with the thick folders stagnant against his curled forearm.

"Yeah. Last week, I got to come home from school early because I didn't feel good..." he muttered, keeping his eyes glued to the dog guiltily.

"How early? I don't remember that, where did you go?" his mother questioned, now on the edge of the couch turned towards him.

"Like, twenty minutes early. Not long... but the chief hadn't left yet... the kitchen window was wide open and I... I was curious." He finally admitted, "I listened in on... on, everything."

Hopper looked to ceiling with his hands on his hips while Joyce inhaled sharply. "Will, I can't believe you'd do that!"

"I'm sorry Mom. But, Jonathan and I deserve to know... we're not the

ones keeping secrets in this family." Will accused, already feeling the lead weight on his conscience at the obvious emotional pain he was inflicting on his mother.

"Honey..." Joyce hugged her son tightly, kissing his forehead, "you're absolutely not wrong, but you have to understand. These are only the early stages in our plans, there's still so much to work out... You two have enough on your plates..."

Hopper scowled, his stress levels spiked and in desperate need of caffeine again. "We need you to keep your mouth shut about this kid, for the time being. Understand why?" he growled, slamming the folders down on the coffee table and kneeling heavily beside the boy.

Will nodded meekly under the force of his intimidating glare. "I understand sir. None of this is set in stone right? I mean, you could change your mind about it tomorrow..."

"I'd never change my mind about her, kid." Hopper stated, brow scrunching as Joyce placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Slowly, the corners of the boy's mouth lifted enough to reveal his teeth...

The wide beam of her youngest was something to be revelled in, as once in a blue moon as it was. Joyce relieved his smile with a small one of her own.

"I'm really glad to hear that chief. But we can totally help! I mean, Jonathan knows a lot of good music, he'd be a good DJ... and I'll be the ring-bearer, I mean, if you want one..."

The blank expressions on both adults' faces as they recognized a misconstruction of the information once again pervaded the atmosphere with awkward rigidity.

5. Chapter 5

"No kid. I'm not marrying your mom."

The blank expression on both of their faces had turned to immediate discomfort and confusion as Will cracked a wry smile. "Then what's the big secret?"

Maybe it was the sleep deprivation and constant voices running through his head, but Will wasn't feeling very much himself.

The tickle in his stomach forced him to giggle a little, before another deep, hacking cough made itself known by rousing the bile in his stomach.

"What were we talking about?" he asked, a minute passed unrecognized as he came to in his mother's arms. "I don't feel good..."

"Sweetie, I think you should stay home. I'll call the Sinclairs and tell them you're not going..." Joyce decided. She wasn't letting him out of sight, not while this odd, and frankly extremely frightening, behaviour continued...

Will suddenly turned to the police chief, stoic, staring down the boy's strange behaviour. "Will, have you been getting any sleep at all?" the chief asked, inclining towards him.

He chose not to answer, looking slightly guilty at the anxious expression on his mother's face. "I know you were really here to talk about finding Eleven, I was just... joking..."

"Helluva joke kid."

A deep and audible sigh of exasperation shared between the adults, silently calculating a correct response...

"Look, Will. This isn't something you need to be messed up in again." Hopper, after an untold amount of time, declared authoritatively.

"Yes, we're looking for her. But that doesn't mean you and your little friends need to be searching..." He stood up again, heading back to

the front door letting out another sigh...

"Like it matters whether or not we know. There's nothing we can do about it right?" Will muttered, hands gone loose in Joyce's grasp as he stared at the floor.

"You four always seem to find a way..." Joyce countered, standing up as well.

"But NOT this time, leave it to the adults." Hopper finished. "Now, I gotta get home."

"I'll show you out." Joyce offered, closing the door on her sulking son as the man before her patted his pockets down for his missing lighter, unlit cigarette pressed between his lips.

"Something wrong?" Joyce asked, watching him draw in a deep puff. His thousand yard stare, piercing blue eyes searched the treeline...

"Besides your son? No. Not yet at least..."

"We're done for today then?" she continued, a little irked at the comment, even if she couldn't stop herself agreeing with it.

"Yeah. Let me know if something comes up. I'm heading back to the office..."

Joyce, puzzled at the disappearance of his once infamous lethargy, called out in farewell "Go home tonight, you could do with a break some time."

Eyes hardened, face contemplating. Instincts acquired as a city cop for 15 years nagged at him, telling him that something really wasn't right with Will.

No doubt Will would tell his friends about all he'd heard. It meant nothing but deep shit, for all the kids and their families...

And he couldn't stop it. What he could do, find a portal, contact, anything... needed to outpace them.

Hopper needed the girl secure, before she realised her humanity,

however tiny and fragile.

Before the government bodies took matters into their own hands. But how?

His cigarette burned down untouched as he drove...

6. Chapter 6

Night rolled over the small town of Hawkins, bringing with it a blanket of frigid cold and dense clouds to blot out the stars above. The air was still, weighing heavily on the young man as he drew his overcoat closer to his chest.

From the door of his '71 Ford LTD, he nervously stalked up to the entrance of the picturesque house at the end of the cul de sac. Jonathan couldn't feel comfortable at this hour, short of the excuse of picking up his brother.

The sharp rapping of knuckles against wood followed by the doorbell assured him that his visit wouldn't go unannounced. He shoved his hands in his pockets and sighed, wishing he'd called Nancy from the workplace phone before taking off.

Relief took hold however, when the door opened devoid of angry Wheeler parents but one girl standing expectantly in front of him. "Come on in. I'm really sorry you had to make it this hour."

"No problem! I totally forgot we hadn't handed it in already..." Jonathan tugged his satchel around as they made a beeline for the living room.

"Right, the paper... but, uhhh... did you have those, you know, OTHER pictures?"

Nancy leaned in slightly to whisper this, luminous eyes darting towards the stairwell.

"Are you sure your parents are okay with me being here?" he questioned, pulling a thickset brown envelope from his bag. The pungent odour of chemicals infiltrated her nostrils, proof that they were recently developed.

"I didn't tell them you were coming..." she confessed, spreading the pictures carefully across the coffee table.

Jonathan shook his head, "whatever, it's on you if they see me..."

"Yeah yeah yeah, I'll... wait, these are all for tomorrow's print. Where are the photos of the LAB, Jonathan?"

Nancy stared him down until he finally gave in. Rolling his eyes, he brought forth the second envelope, parchment this time, preserving the results of a higher calibre process.

"I still can't believe you went there without me..." she sulked, delicate fingers stroking the laminate surface of a depicted abandoned laboratory. A blue tinged overhead light cast illumination across the murky steel table tops, glass cupboards and doors peeking into other rooms and corridors.

"I didn't have time to get anyone else." He defended.

He'd been staking out the grounds since November, inspecting the ins and outs of it, the daily routines of the guards, entering procedures. The herd of residents had thinned drastically, with few exiting cars and even fewer entering.

She stilled, hands clenching into fists as her gaze turned back to him in earnest. "Jonathan, we're a team. We look out for each other. Promise you won't go looking again without me..."

The slim window of opportunity presented itself during a late afternoon last week. Two of the three security guards failed to show up that day as scheduled, the other one forced to stay at the entrance toll leaving an unguarded blind spot on the other side of the building.

"Yeah, I promise. Won't happen again..." he ruefully stated.

Jonathan saw his avid fascination and subsequent hours spent studying the mechanics of cameras outside of his life scope come to use that day. Blindsiding the security cams was as easy as knowing which walls to flatten against every ten seconds and the focal points of a lens with diameter five inches.

He knew he'd hit it home once he shimmied through the broken hinged window leading into a random storage closet...

"They pretty much shut down the lab at this point." Jonathan concluded, after explaining each of the pictures and which route he

took to get to them. "It's useless going back, I mean... I've got bags of samples at home, some really weird shit..."

"I'll come over tomorrow." Nancy uttered, bringing the picture up to the lamp light while Jonathan shuffled the rest of the pictures back into their covering. A deep fissure ran the entire length of the wall with crumbling plaster and concrete strewn across the ground.

No protrusions, no pulsing alien veins or skin covered portals leading to a different dimension. The remnant hole was superficial, remarkable only in its odd and now purposeless shape.

Shadowy lumps at the top corners of this wall that once held the gate to the upside down caught her eye, forcing her to peer in as closely as she could at the peculiar, glittering shape...

"Are those... larvae nests?" she asked, face screwing up apprehensively at the giant black hives mottled with blackened hovels...

"Empty ones, maybe." Jonathan responded, hiding the shudder of his spine as he recalled just how big they'd been. He just managed to detect the muttering of 'gross' under her breath.

"These things grew outside of their own world. What if they're still out there?" she pondered, delicate hands reaching out slowly to grasp his elbow.

Jonathan dragged his head up to find their faces barely an inch apart, his own worry reflected in her regard. "I don't know... but we need to be ready."

"Ready for what?"

The teenagers jumped apart to the opposite ends of the couch as the third party voice as Karen entered the room. Jonathan opened his mouth to stutter out some form of apology, but Nancy beat him to answering first.

"For... tomorrow. When the template's due." Nancy replied, "by the way Mom, Jonathan was meant to come over... to help me with the articles."

Karen's gaze crossed each of them questioningly. "Are you in the newspaper club too Jonathan?"

"Yes Ma'am. I'm the photographer..." Jonathan stated shyly, gesturing at the photos still spread out on the table. "My friend had me cover him at work so I couldn't come earlier, sorry."

"I had no idea." Karen marvelled, glancing over the various articles. "Why didn't you mention this earlier Nancy?"

Said girl shrugged, "I forgot."

Neither the young man nor mother looked impressed, clearly. "That's fine. You must be hungry after work Jonathan, how about I heat up some leftovers..." Karen offered.

"Thanks Mrs Wheeler, but I'm just about to head home. I was only here a minute and dinner's waiting..." Jonathan said as he stood up again, leaving the photos to Nancy.

She flashed him a forgiving smile, "Alright then. Nice to see you Jonathan..." before disappearing into the kitchen leaving her daughter to show him out to his car.

The frigid air went ignored as they walked to his car together, lost in their own retrospective thoughts.

"Nancy, have you heard from Steve yet?" he asked, knowing by now that she wouldn't respond too emotively at the simple mention of him.

Two months ago they found out a secret that Steve had been keeping from them. His shaky relationship with his parents, known to Nancy, turned worse when his father lost his employment.

She shrugged, worn loafer scuffing the kerb as she leaned against his passenger door. "He only called the one time. I think he's trying to move on... forget about us... about all of this mess."

His job as the head technician at Hawkins Laboratory... terminated when their main subject, a little girl with enough contained power to run a nuclear factory, disappeared.

"I wish we could afford the luxury of forgetting..." he admitted, slumping over the bonnet of his car. Nancy nodded, still staring down at her shoes. "He was an idiot, but he still saved us... saved you."

His parents had packed up their mansion and moved to California just after New Year's...

"Yeah, and I'll never forget..." he growled in reply. It was the only thing that stopped him from shoving Steve's nose in and rearranging his face again.

It wasn't the fact of his father's direct involvement in the terrifying events that stole his younger brother away. He had no say on that matter...

Nor were they irate about him leaving them all behind. Both teenagers could understand that...

But the real kicker came two weeks after he'd left. A single phone call, admitting all the grievances with and about his father, moving away, the decision that they should see other people.

After all the promises he's made to her... that he was a changed man... that he'd be there for her.

Jonathan knew that beneath the thick skin Nancy grew after that harrowing week, there was still the fragile dancer, the girl who wore her heart on her sleeve and had just lost her first lover...

And in an unrestrained fit of emotion she'd called him that night, failing to hold back sobs that made his heart ache.

Nancy turned to no-one else in that moment, and if Jonathan was honest with himself, he was happy to fill the cavity that opened up in her heart.

"I'll see you tomorrow?" she asked, stepping back onto the footpath as the passenger window came down and his head popped out of it.

"Yup. AP chemistry test first thing. Chromogenic materials use what to form colour images...?"

"Dye couplers. And the C-41 and RA-4 processes are used to...?"

"Develop colour negative film and colour negative print materials. You know, what I do every day in my bat cave..."

Nancy giggled, arms folded as she backed up to her front door.
"Goodnight, Jonathan."

"Night Nancy..."

She leaned against the open doorway, staring long after the boy, with his mind still stuck on her sweet expression warmer in the outside light, left...

7. Chapter 7

Tuesday 17th April, 1984

He walked carefully through the upside-down, eyes darting every which way and making sure nothing was able to grab him. Never touch the walls, avoid the floor if it wasn't flat. If anything so much as twitched, run. The air couldn't be avoided but his wheezing was as inaudible as he could make it. 'I wonder if she really is lost in here...'

Like El had done before, Will was learning to face his fears. He needed no gateway to reach this world, for he'd never actually left his own. Astral projection, the term he'd looked up in the library the other day, was a form of telepathy where a person experienced things outside of their body. His spirit, or maybe his soul, travelled here and wanted to explore.

Maybe a piece of this world had latched onto him when he'd stayed for that traumatic week. Those were all just theories really, all he knew was that this dark place continued to call to him and he continued to answer. 'Where are those voices coming from?'

Had he tried facing his fears earlier, Will would have learned some important things a lot sooner. The upside down was a world that preyed on fear. Fear, unfortunately, didn't last in the face of repetitiveness. One could only see the monsters so many times before they stopped being scary.

'If I let those centipedes crawl over me without pushing them away would they try to eat my insides, really?' he'd asked himself only a couple of nights earlier when he'd first stopped completely fearing that hellish place.

Several of one type of monster like creature eagerly crawled over his legs that night, lazy figure-8 patterns made with their centipede bodies before they scuttled back under his bed. They'd sometimes creep onto his arms even, but nowhere near his mouth or other orifices. So some creatures in that world weren't out to kill him... 'Still, better safe than sorry...'

In the present moment, he noticed a thin stream of white mist cutting through the green and black of the upside-down version of his home. Quiet little whispers, the voices he'd heard earlier, emanated from said smoke.

The stream of white moved down the hallway and into Jonathan's room. Will pushed open the door and found the mist pooled up over the bed, right where Jonathan would be sleeping.

'This wasn't here before, when I was in this world...' Will thought, staring at the white fog. 'Maybe it's just because I'm not actually here that it shows up...'

The mist curled around his fingers as he sat on the bed and reached out. Then, all at once it rushed into his head, mostly through his ears. He saw images, the first of his own face as he'd lain in a hospital bed. The second of his mother, crying with her head in her hands. The third of Nancy, lying in bed and staring at him.

And the whispers became clear to him...

"Will's going to get better, he needs to..."

"She hasn't told me yet what's happened, how do I ask though?"

"I wish I could tell her what she meant to me..."

Will found he could read Jonathan's thoughts and memories...

He woke up with blood dripping from nose to cheek. There'd be no more sleep had that night, but it was the beginning of something extraordinary.

The next night he tried the same trick on his mother with the same results. He went to the farmer down the road's house, ducking and weaving between blood-sucking trees and reaching the mist, ready and waiting for him to stick his head in.

The mist was everywhere a person was... He made it to Mike's house and found a moving cloud of worry about the three wheeler kids. Said cloud rounded the dingy sewer of a kitchen and travelled down dank, mouldy hallways.

Mrs Wheeler was still up at midnight, moving through her home and stopping at all the bedrooms. Will didn't feel like eavesdropping too much after that, he'd gotten all the information he needed.

As he forced himself to wake following the tenth night he'd spent exploring, he grabbed a tissue and decided it was finally time to tell them...

8. Chapter 8

Thursday 19th April, 1984

"So let me get this straight... you have superpowers too?"

Will gave a small nod and leaned back in his seat, away from Dustin's hands that eagerly tried to grab him in a grip of excitement.

"If what you're saying is true... Do you know what we're thinking right now?" Lucas asked, leaning forward with his chin on his knuckles "I-I can try. Umm, think of a number between 1 and 10."

Will moved to the couch and covered his hands with his eyes, concentrating. "I've got the number in my head, tell Me." said Lucas.

"Eight." Will said correctly.

Lucas leaned back with his arms crossed. "Too easy, my number's between 1 and 100 now..."

"73."

His mouth twitched into an almost smile. He thought for a little while. "Between 1 and... and infinity!"

"3, 0, 0, 7, 8, 9, 4, 1, 1. How do you say that number?"

"Three hundred million, seven hundred eighty nine thousand four hundred and eleven... right?" Dustin answered. Lucas finally nodded, patting Will's shoulder as said boy wiped the blood from his nose with a weak smile.

"Yup, you're one of the X-men. That's awesome, and your nose is bleeding just like El's used to... I mean, does!" He flinched, as did Dustin and Mike, at the mention of the girl's name but nevertheless continued. "But sorry, you look tired now..."

Unlike Dustin, Lucas maintained his scepticism of everything paranormal, even after the unbelievable week last year. He liked to check his sources thoroughly...

The three turned towards their leader, Mike, who hadn't stopped pacing since Will's story began. "Guys, he only paces like that when he's planning something big..." Dustin said in a low voice.

"Uh-oh. Hey Mike, you okay?" Lucas asked hesitantly, standing in his path.

He stopped at the door, twitching a little before he turned towards them with glassy eyes. They didn't bother him about it but focused on the matter at hand. "Are you kidding me? I'm way better than okay!"

"What we've got..." he carried on, sitting on an empty chair at the table, "is the best chance at finding El right now."

"How though? He said he's looked around the upside-down and didn't see her..."

Lucas didn't follow the excited boy's train of thought, looking to Will who shrugged as well. Rolling his eyes, Dustin brought it upon himself to explain.

"Come on guys we need you two to keep up! Mike's saying that because Will has telepathy, he can find anyone's mind if he searches for it long enough... right?"

"Even hers!" Both boys realised at once and Dustin grinned in satisfaction. "I don't mean to bust anyone's hopes, but..." Will conditioned, turning hesitantly to Mike.

"But what?" said boy asked.

"I can't find them if they're dead..." he stated in his usual quiet tone.

"I tried with my grandparents, but the graveyard was totally empty... people's thoughts travel with their bodies."

"I... well, it doesn't matter anyway because she's not dead!" Mike replied, standing up again. "She just went to another dimension, maybe not the upside down though. You can get stronger and find her right?"

"Y-yeah Mike. I mean, I'll try my best..." Will smiled as Mike got up

and hugged him quickly, followed by Dustin and Lucas. "Yeah, it's still a chance." Lucas affirmed, hand on Mike's shoulder.

"Should we tell the adults about this?" Dustin considered. Both Mike and Will shook their heads vehemently. "Better we don't, my mom'd have us on lockdown if she knew..." Will stated.

"And what did the chief ever tell us? You remember what Will said last week, screw them!" Mike added, still a little angry at the concealed information their friend had shared when they were at Lucas's house.

"I wish I'd known her, y'know?" Will said, as they relaxed in their seats. "If I knew what to look for, maybe I'd find her faster..."

"Well, look for a thought cloud with eggos in it, and blankets... and candy, she likes candy. And uuhh... she likes Yoda, I showed her my star-wars action figures when she stayed here."

"And look for Mike's face in little hearts in her cloud, so he'll know she loooves him too!"

The other boys chuckled as Mike pushed Lucas for teasing him. He couldn't help himself from grabbing Will and saying "Oh El... El wait for me! I'm Mike and I'll find you, even IF it's in another dimension!"

The tense atmosphere of the room eased a little as Lucas found himself tackled onto the couch. He laughed along with Dustin and Will as Mike threw his weak fists at the stronger kid's hands, blushing profusely.

Dustin rolled his eyes and pulled Mike off him. "You know he's kidding Mike, she's our friend and we wanna find her just as much as you. We're in this together."

Dustin reached a fist out across the table, with Will following suit in a show of comradery. Lucas reached an arm around Mike's shoulder, sticking his fist in too. "Come on Mike, we're all in."

Mike brushed himself off, grumbling with his face still red. Even with the teasing, he was infinitely grateful for the guys' support as he finished their four-way fist-bump. "Yeah, right here's the whole party."

We'll find her if it's the last adventure we ever have!"

Their arms rose with a cheer. "Now, let's make a plan..." Mike continued.

They left Mike's basement that night knowing Will was going to practice his telepathy as much as he could. Meanwhile the other boys would continue trying to find a signal. It wasn't a lot to go on, but they'd keep their hopes up... for her.

9. Chapter 9

...

Friday 20th April, 1984

...

In a near-empty lot on the eastern side of town sat a house propped up on cinder blocks that looked more like a shipping container. 'But it was, once...' Chief Jim Hopper thought as he slammed his truck door shut and dragged his black case inside. 'Home sweet home' read on the door mat outside the steps leading up to the elevated tin-shack with its rusted shingle roof that needed repairs badly.

Inside, there was a single space that had a sink and microwave, he ate mostly take-out so there wasn't a need for a stove, and coffee came unlimited at the station. 'Sooner or later I'm gonna have to clean up this dump...'

Later, he decided. Kicking the strewn garbage out of his way he found the remote pushed under the coffee table and switched on his set, letting it hum with snowy static and washed out colour before settling on the image of channel 1 news. He opened his low-set fridge with a prodding foot as his eyes stayed focused on the screen.

"And it looks like there'll be another round of lightning up ahead for Lake County, with this upcoming storm everybody better drive slow tonight..." the reporter warned, "Same goes for Porter and Fort Wayne who've been experiencing the effects of Tropical Storm Arlene for almost a week now. Not a great time to be at work right Lisa?"

Rain clouds covered a third of Indiana, half of that accompanied by lightning and thunder. It wasn't usual of the state to be experiencing such forces of nature. Hopper watched as the screen cut to images of the lightning that appeared in open fields, hitting the ground in successive strikes. "Those don't look like typical storms Gary, what could be the cause?"

"We don't know right now, according to our expert meteorologists

Arlene shouldn't have hit us this bad..." the reporters continued discussing the extremely atypical weather-occurrences as Hopper's eyes drifted to the open curtained window, looking out into the cloudless sky whose stars shone. The instinct was nagging him again, just like with Will's expression earlier.

In the last year he'd learned that it wasn't crazy to take everything as a sign. These storms, however far away they were right now, were probably a bead on the string of phenomena that knocked into the case of the still missing Eleven. Or possibly more government experiments gone awry...

...

At the end of the cul-de sac another house with a television set showed the exact same images. Karen Wheeler gasped at pictures of families with small children trying to escape the effects of the storm. She held her husband's hand tightly, eyes glued to the story but at the same time keeping all three of her children in her peripheral vision.

Nancy and Mike watched just as intently, Holly now squirming in Mike's arms as the boy had stopped bouncing her up and down. "Pull me down Mike!" she cried in her tiny voice, rolling off his lap with a giggle and crossing the screen on her way upstairs. "I needa go potty Mommy!"

"Alright sweetie I'm coming!" She gave another worried glance at the set, and also the stillness of her two oldest children. Sighing, she then proceeded to chase her baby upstairs.

"And I'm turning in early, night kids..." their elderly father yawned before heading upstairs as well. Nancy tapped her little brother's shoulder. "Hey Mike, do you think those storms mean something?"

"Huh, what are you talking 'bout Nancy?"

The usual eyebrow raise had evolved to include a smirk directed at her. For a fleeting second she remembered considering him nothing but a snarky brat. And while he may still be that, he was also thoughtful and kind, especially concerning his friends. "You know what I'm talking about! Do you think this has anything to do with

Eleven?"

He turned silent for a moment and she paused her words as well, watching him turn back to the screen. "Well... I hope it does. Not sure how though."

"I can't explain it. Like, doesn't it feel as if something big is gonna happen?" she whispered, sliding to the ground next to him. He nodded, gulping audibly and turning back to his sister. "Ever since Will disappeared it's always felt like that. Nancy..."

"Yeah Mike?"

"It'd be okay... if you were around, if that thing you were talking about happened." He gulped again, turning away to stare at the TV and hide the fear in his eyes while Nancy brought an arm over his shoulders. "I think that too."

Mike nudged her arm off him, gently, and they retreated to their rooms. Nancy to study for the endless tests she seemed to get since the beginning of her senior year, Mike to play with his supercomm idly in the hopes that somewhere out there, a signal from El was trying to reach him.

...

Jonathan knocked on the door and shoved his hands in his pockets nervously, satchel slung over one shoulder. Nancy opened the door, stepping aside to let him. "Sorry you had to come so late, but you have those pictures?"

He nodded in reply. "Sorry I had to take a work-shift last minute. This isn't after curfew or anything is it?"

"No way! It's only nine, and my parents will understand." Nancy left him in the living room for a second. Just as he sat down though Karen came in with Holly in her arms. "Hey Nancy did I hear the door? Oh!" She took a step back as Jonathan stood up. "Mrs Wheeler! I'm sorry I came at a time like this but I-"

"I asked him to Mom, to bring the photos for our template." Nancy explained, the folded cardboard that contained their articles tucked

under her arm. "Remember when I said last semester I'm the editor? Jonathan signed up this year. He's our photographer."

"I had no idea." Karen relaxed and leaned over them, looking down at the various bits of paper and bundle of photos he'd taken out of his satchel. "Why didn't you say he was in the newspaper club earlier Nancy?"

The girl shrugged. "I never thought to tell you Mom. Sorry, but we're just going to work on this for a couple of hours, is that okay?"

"Well, I see no reason why not." She felt Holly squirming again and backed away. "I'll let you finish then and put this one to sleep. It's nice to see you Jonathan."

"Nice to see you too Mrs Wheeler, sorry again." She flashed him a forgiving smile before disappearing up the stairwell. Nancy grabbed his wrist and turned to hi, innocent expression dropping. "Where are the other pictures, the ones you told me about over the phone?"

He answered by grabbing a thinner brown envelope also from his bag. "I still can't believe you went there without me!" she growled, keeping her voice low. He shrugged, "It was only to take photos. And I thought there might be something related to Will there, he's still so sick..."

Her eyes softened as he looked away, hands clenching into fists that folded over the pictures. "Still. Next time, I'm going with you. We're a team Jonathan, we look out for each other..."

He unclenched his hands again and handed her the photos to spread out on the table one by one. They were still perfumed with chemicals, having been developed mere hours ago. The first four showed what used to be the gate at different angles. A deep fissure in the wall, running the entire length of the wall with Crumbling plaster and concrete strewn across the ground.

There were no other-worldly protrusions, no pulsing alien veins or skin covered holes that led to a different world. The hole was superficial, remarkable only in its odd and now purposeless shape.

"So they just abandoned Hawkins Lab facilities? Where did they go?" Nancy asked him. "I wouldn't have a clue. The whole fence had police tape across it and it looked like people only recently left. I could tell by the green grass."

At her questioning look he elaborated. "Their lawns were green but outside the fence was brown. That means the sprinklers were turned off only recently."

"Nice observation, detective." She was impressed, patting his shoulder lightly as he gave her an abashed smile. She continued to peruse the photos of abandoned hallways and empty lab rooms, before a few in particular made her stop. "Are those... larvae nests?"

"Empty ones, maybe. If they really were, I doubt they were holding any normal insects..." Jonathan shook his head and Nancy shuddered, muttering 'gross' under her breath. Lab rooms with metal tables held giant black hives, dead looking with mottled surfaces.

"These freak scientists grew them outside of their own world Jonathan. What if those monsters are still here?" she asked, grabbing his elbow again. He placed a gentle hand on hers, his worried expression reflected in her own face. "I don't know. They're probably hiding right? Waiting until they get stronger..."

"We need to be ready then." Nancy nodded resolutely and Jonathan. "You wanna come shooting in the woods again? Mom bought a shotgun, for protection... I've never been pro-guns, but lately..."

"I know what you mean. All that crazy shit that happened. I'm still on edge." she admitted. "Since last year..."

"Have you heard from Steve?" he asked, to which she shook her head. "He only called the one time. I think he's trying to forget about us..."

"Good idea. I wish we could forget..." he admitted. Nancy nodded tiredly, slumping into her chair. "He was an idiot, but he still saved us... saved you." Steve and his family moved to California two months back. He'd decided to end things with her as well, and although she'd lost any real love for him long before, it still hurt.

"Yeah, and I'll never forget..." It was the only thing that stopped him from shoving Steve's nose in again after hearing about the callous way he'd ended things with her.

She'd called him that night, failing to hold back sobs that made his heart ache. Nancy turned to no-one else in that moment, and if Jonathan was honest with himself, he'd admit he was happy to fill the cavity that opened up in her heart. He stood up and made to leave, packing away the Hawkins Lab photos. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Yup. I'm glad you decided to step out of your comfort zone this semester Jonathan. You always had good grades right? Especially in art and chemistry?" Nancy said, following him to the door.

"Mm well... photography is art. And chemicals are what I work with in the dark room. It's useful to know their names and what they do... and which ones not to mix." He walked to the bottom step before turning back to her. "Night Nancy."

"Night Jonathan." She watched him drive away and then leaned against the doorway, staring long after he left.

...

Her body drifted... together and apart... back and forth... atoms coming in and out like the radio waves she once bounced across joyfully.

Her will to live was fading. The only thing holding her together were memories. Papa, standing at the end of the corridor as she's taken to the small room, and that night at the school, her last night on Earth. Joyce's warm hugs that soothed her in the bath-tub, and her gentle voice and nice words. Small kindnesses she'd come across from Benny at the diner, Dustin and Lucas and Nancy and Jonathan, even Chief Hopper. Acceptance.

All of that and more from Mike, with the addition of his lips that touched hers, reassurance that she was pretty without the wig and tear-stained face as she told him goodbye. She wanted to evaporate, fade into the nothingness once and for all.

'Should I stay... or should I go?'

It was the tiniest whisper she'd ever heard, barely a breath even. Her own breathing deepened, eyes looking around for the source of the noise that perhaps she'd just made up in her own head. No, the voice was still tiny, but it was calling to her, singing. Her legs willed themselves to move forward and she walked, even while she thought she was lying down.

She could feel solid beneath her now, the ground a welcome reprieve from bare air she'd existed in since forever ago. The pads of her feet pressed down and made her toes tingle and steps falter. It was ground, it was sturdy and reliable and she stood on it once again. El had to fight the urge to drop down and kiss it for gracing her meagre existence, but she needed to walk... then run, across the endless shadow ahead of her in search of that voice.

"Darlin' you got to let me know..."

She froze, spinning all around her in search of it. "Hello..." Her voice was croaky from disuse and throat sore. "Hello? Help! HELP ME!"

She screamed at the top of her lungs and dropped to her knees, looking straight up into the endless black. The voice was still singing, familiar but not at the same time. A familiar song, lyrics that tickled the back of her brain.

Crying now, with tears soaking the filthy, flimsy rags that once made up Nancy's old dress as she tucked her head into her knees. She listened to the tiny voice and tried to sing along.

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10. Chapter 10

...

Wednesday April 25th, 1984

...

Castle Byers still stood in the woods behind the Byers' home, its rotten wood floor replaced with a new set of planks Chief Hopper had brought over, abandoned in the lot he lived in. The walls had been thickened with extra cord-tied branches and a spare tent canvas thrown over the top to act as water-proofing. At this time, late afternoon, the sun (rarely seen nowadays with all the stormy weather they'd been having) slowly set to the west and its rays peeked through and warmed the face of the boy inside. Leaning against his faithful shaggy dog Benny with his headset on, Will explored the upside-down with music to accompany him in the background. It was the only song he could listen to day in and day out, one he never tired of, his work song that kept him alive and sane when he'd been trapped in that dark world.

"Darlin' you got to let me know..."

Beside him in the real world his supercomm crackled to life but he didn't notice. The static signal coming in and out indicating someone was trying to reach him. Will rolled over as his projection in the upside down turned around, head tilted to the side as the static reached his ears from above, like a speaker in some high up corner he couldn't see.

He thought he could hear something else, underneath the song. A ringing, high pitched whine that faded once before coming back again stronger. Will silently walked towards the noise until it was audible, though still very quiet. The echoes of another voice singing his song came from every direction, surrounding him in the middle of that dense forest. Far off in the distance the usual growls and clicks of some monstrous creature lurking behind bushes and stalking its prey sounded, but he paid no attention to that. The middle of the forest corresponding to his world was alive with nocturnal activity here, for

in its perpetual state of darkness the upside down was home to only nocturnal creatures.

Back to the voices though. Or rather, voice. It sang with a slight warble, she sang with a warble. Definitely a girl's voice, stumbling over the lyrics as if she'd only heard the song one other time. Will hummed along, waiting for her to finish the line before picking it up.

"One day is fine and next is black

So if you want me off your back..."

He knew he wasn't to be the lead-singer of a band in any universe, but still kept his voice going as he wandered through the forest and stopped at a big tree. Its root protruding far from the earth was comfortable enough to sit on while he scratched at an itch on his face. "Well come on an' let me know... Should I stay or... should I..." He touched underneath his nose and felt the wet drop of crimson liquid brighter than anything else here. Why was his nose bleeding?

The crackle of abrasive radio static pierced through his eardrums and woke him in his own world, forcing him to sit up and throw headphones off in panic. He wiped his nose that was bleeding in real life too, picking up the supercomm that sounded off next to him. "Hello? Is someone there?"

He heard breathing through the shaky signal as he brought the device to his ear. "Mike?" the voice asked, with the same tone and warble he'd just heard in the upside down. "Mike?" It was definitely a girls by the raised pitch, her breathy sighs that sounded of relief. "No it's not Mike, it's Will. Is this... Eleven?"

"Will..."The static grew louder and he stood up and pulled out the antenna, trying to stabilise it.

"Eleven, I'm Mike's friend! Can you tell me where you are?"

"Will... help..."

"You need help El, I- we can help you! Where are you?"

"Dark..."

"In the upside down?"

"No... nowhere..."

'Where is nowhere?' he thought incredulously, scrambling out of Castle Byers as Benny whined at him, staying put. He kept the supercom as high as he could and kept talking. "Are you hurt El? Can you get out of there?"

"No... Will..."

She was panicking now, her breathing through the radio coming in louder and raspier. "Help... Nowhere..."

"Just... hold on El, just hold on! We'll come get you!" Her voice was being drowned out by the static and as much as he tried he couldn't hear anything other than the distinct sound of crying. The signal cut off as he made it back inside the house, rushing to the phone. He dialled one of the three numbers he had memorised by heart besides the police station and waited, breath held.

"Wheeler's residence, may I ask who this is?"

"Hi Mrs Wheeler it's Will, can I talk to Mike?"

She called out to her son and told him just a second, before another voice came to life on the line. "Hey Will, you okay?"

"Yeah I'm fine, but you need to come over right now with Dustin and Lucas. I mean... remember that campaign... we had planned, and my part of the story... the bit with the proud princess?" He spoke cryptically, remembering the code they'd made up in case they were being listened to by anyone within earshot (or tapping into their phones).

Will could see the other boy in his mind's eye gasping in shock before jumping up and down excitedly. "You... finished it?"

"I made contact. Come to Castle Byers now."

"We're on our way!"

...

Friday 4th May, 1984

...

That morning's weather report had called for rain, but though the sky was cloudy for most of the day it felt dry and hot outside. Hopper studied the last of the case-files ahead of them, ones surprisingly not related to Jane 'Eleven' Ives. Mundane calls that had been set out before him, such as the kid named Billy Jacobs stealing gnomes off of old man Hilbert's lawn and another request to play security guard for the Hawkins' founding father's festival week in the town-centre.

He dealt with the gnome thief and denied the security guard request. His office had become his home now, with an extra work uniform hanging up on the door, the cell-cot connected to his office always rumpled when he couldn't not sleep any longer. Bathroom had a shower here, coffee pot and microwave were easy-access in Flo his receptionist's unlocked office so why not stay?

"Does it feel like the hairs on your arms are standing Jim?" Flo asked him, moving away from her keyboard with concern etched across her slightly wrinkled face. "I'm not old enough to feel it in my bones just yet, but today seems like it's gonna be lightning."

From the open door she watched Hopper nod upwards once, twice, before looking up at her with his usual lazy smile. "I think you're right there Flo, and I'll tell you what. Why don't you go home early today and finish writing up those files tomorrow? I promise you I'm not in a hurry to get them back."

"Oh, you mean it Jim? That'd mean the world since my daughter's coming back with my grandbaby in a couple hours... I'll have time to make dinner ready for them."

"All the more reason, pack up and take off now while it isn't raining."

She left as quickly as she could, waving out to him through his window from her car and taking off. He felt his arms and nodded, for the hairs there, and even the ones under his hat were raised.

The sky outside was dark, too dark. It was only ten minutes after Flo left that the rain came down, one fat globule of water following another. Before long it felt like an all-out monsoon that blocked his vision through the window. 'Damnit, this isn't good...' he thought darkly. Hopper grabbed his jacket and keys before locking up behind him and running to his truck. 'I'll head to the store and buy dinner, check on Joyce while I'm there...'

On the way to the store he noticed the clouds piling on top of each other. They were the beginnings of an electrical storm, grey and black swirling through the darkness, following the path of a low pressure front.

He reached the convenience store, sliding a bit on the soaked entrance before immediately heading towards the dark haired woman at the front register. She regarded him with surprise. "Hey Jim, what can I do for you?"

"Joyce, when's your shift over?"

"I'm working late tonight." Joyce watched as he took some random food items off the closest shelves and threw a 5 dollar bill down. "Not a good idea, storm's coming in fast..." he replied with a warning tone.

After he said that a huge boom of thunder came from above and she jumped in fright, looking upwards. The thunder was immediately followed by a flash of white light outside the window and the lights flickered on and off. "It's supposed to get worse. You might not make it home tonight..."

"Well Jonathan's watching the boys, Will's friends are staying over..." she turned towards him with a slightly crazed look in her eye.

"It's nothing serious, is it?"

"I don't know, it's just a feeling..." Hop turned away from her and stared out the window again, taking a cigarette out of his front pocket. He felt a hand on his arm and turned to find her with her work-apron off, purse slung over her shoulder. "Manager said I'm free to leave in 30 minutes, but I need to help close shop. You mind giving me a ride? I was meant to wait for Justine but..." He nodded,

walking back out the store to wait in the sky outside was dark, too dark. It was only ten minutes after Maureen left that the rain came down, one fat globule of water following another. Before long it felt like an all-out monsoon that blocked his vision through the window. 'Damnit, this isn't good...' he thought darkly. Hopper shook his head and grabbed his jacket and keys before locking up behind him and running to his truck. 'I'll head to the store and buy dinner, check on Joyce while I'm there...'

On the way to the store he noticed the clouds piling on top of each-other. They were the beginnings of an electrical storm, grey and black swirling through the darkness, following the path of the low pressure front that had been detected that morning.

He reached the convenience store and ran in again, sliding a bit on the soaked entrance before immediately heading towards the dark haired woman at the front register. She regarded him with surprise. "Hey Jim, what can I do for you?"

"Joyce, when's your shift over?"

"I'm working late tonight." Joyce watched as he took some random food items off the closest shelves and threw a 5 dollar bill down. "Not a good idea, storm's coming in fast..." he replied darkly.

Just after he said that a huge boom of thunder came from above and she jumped in fright, looking upwards. The thunder was immediately followed by a flash of white light outside the window and the lights flickered on and off. "It's supposed to get worse. You might not make it home tonight."

"Well Jonathan's watching the boys, Will's friends are staying over..." she turned towards him with a slightly crazed look in her eye.

"It's nothing serious, is it?"

"I don't know, it's just a feeling..." Hop turned away from her and stared out the window again, taking a cigarette out of his front pocket. He felt a hand on his arm and turned to find her with her work-apron off, purse slung over her shoulder. "Manager said I'm free to leave in 30 minutes but I need to help close shop. We weren't

gonna make any business after this anyways... You mind giving me a ride? I was meant to wait for Justine to finish but..." He nodded, walking ahead of her as they made their way to his truck and off into the night.

...

Rainwater flooded almost all of the low-lying parts of Hawkins within the hour, blocking off parts of the town from each other and stopping coming in and out of the area from the interstate highways. The storm came as a surprise to all the meteorologists apparently, who hadn't been able to predict such an occurrence and even went so far as to state that it had nothing to do with Tropical Storm Arlene, but something else entirely unknown.

There was much confusion surrounding the storm and with it came panic, as the Hawkins citizens were being advised to stay in their homes or seek shelter at the open school gym or church that night.

"That's Mirkwood!" Lucas exclaimed, pointing at the screen as their well-known road came on for a few seconds before disappearing to some other flooded driveways. "I can't believe all this happened in under an hour!"

"Yeah, it's not on record... Could be the first of its kind here." Jonathan leaned forward with his hands on his knees shook his head, "I'm gonna call your moms and tell them you're okay."

"Do you think Mom will get back tonight Jonathan?" Will asked worriedly, standing up as well and waving his friends over to his room ahead of him. His older brother shrugged, "not since the road looks like that she won't. She can go to Justine's house though since they're not blocked." Outside the sky continued to darken and rain lashed at the windows behind closed curtains. The thunder had stopped, but flashes of white light outside let them know it was only a matter of time before it came back.

When Jonathan left the four boys huddled together and whispered between each other. "Electrical storms short out radio-wave signals so we shouldn't bother trying to find anything tonight..." Dustin said, dropping the radio equipment he'd brought over that was set up in

the corner of Will's room. "But it's still freaking amazing that you got her the other day!"

"Are you sure it was her though? I mean, it could've been a prank..."

Dustin rolled his eyes and punched Lucas's arm. "Come on man, take his word for it! He said he heard her just like he said he was telepathic."

"And no, we're not gonna stop searching just because of some bad weather." Mike replied firmly to Dustin, picking up his own supercomm and connecting it to the very recently bought ham-shack radio they had. All the boys had pooled together their allowances for the last six months to buy it.

"Ow! Okay! Okay, we'll assume it really actually happened. And all you did was sing to her to make reach her three days ago, right?" Lucas asked for reconfirmation. Will nodded again and leaned back, turning to Mike at his left. "It feels like tonight something weird's gonna happen. Doesn't it feel all electric on your skin as well?"

"I think that's just the effects of the storm. Could be something else though, anything could be anything right?" Dustin replied with a shrug. "Anything could be anything..." Lucas shook his head with that 'are you serious?' look, but agreed all the same. "Well, do your thing Will and try to find her again."

Will nodded and lay back on his bed, pressing Benny to his side as his long fringe fell over his face... the boys looked between each other and then at him, waiting for the radio perched on the windowsill to come to life. It took a few minutes before finally a signal sprang out and Mike picked up his connected supercomm.

"You there Will? Over."

"Yeah, I'm here. Over."

It still amazed all of them after the third time that they could do this, talk to him while his body was unconscious right in front of them. The first time, they'd only had their supercomms. With the weaker signals of the handheld radios they were only able to hear Will

without speaking to him.

When the ham-shack radio arrived, the new signal was so strong that a two-way connection with Will in the upside down could be established. They could now communicate between universes...

"I'm walking down Mirkwood, it's still dry. Looks like our weather doesn't affect the weather here. Over."

"Good to know..." Mike replied, a little impatiently. "Any voices yet? Over"

"No. I'll go through the forest and find the spot where I was last time. Over" They could hear the sound of his footsteps crunching against gravel mixed with sludge before the pace picked up as he went downhill. "I'm almost at the big tree. It's umm... oh, there!"

"You found the tree? Over."

"No! I can hear her voice!"

"Eleven!" The boys cheered together, pressing their ears even closer to the radio. "Just be quiet and listen." Will assured them, holding his device high in the air as he walked once around the large tree with its gnarled rots and tried his best to pick up the sound.

He hummed along with the quiet tune and focused on nothing but that voice, arm straight as a rod above him. As he sang the words it felt like her voice was also nearing, just until it was audible and he felt the tell-tale drip down his nose which he swiped at before calling out to her. "Hey, Eleven?!"

Deafening silence came from all ends. After counting to seven Mississippi's, Will felt a huge weight fall off his shoulders when her voice replied. "...Yes."

It was just as warbled as before but she no longer sounded like she was crying, still shaken though, or maybe it was all just the signal. "Mike, Lucas and Dustin are here to talk to you!"

"El!" another voice yelled out of the supercomm, frantic and familiar to her. "El, where are you?!"

"Nowhere." was the same reply she'd given Will as she sniffled, "I don't know..."

...

11. Chapter 11

...

"Do you still remember El? It's Mike, you stayed at my house under the blanket fort for a week!"

"... Yes. Eggos and Yoda."

From the normal world Mike was grinning with delight and he wished he could see her in real life. "Yeah El, Eggos and Yoda. And snowball, remember? They're waiting here for you, when you come back!"

"And so are we El! It's Dustin!"

"Dustin... Hello..."

"And Lucas..."

"Lucas..."

"You just... you just wait, okay? El." Mike felt his voice crack and pushed the supercom away to be immediately taken by Dustin. He didn't know what else they could do right now, but they'd made so much progress in finding her already and he was just... just so happy, to know she was still alive out there. "Mike?" he heard across the line. Her voice sounded different now, not shaky... too serious. "Yeah El?" he called out holding the device to his ear again like a lifeline. There was an audible gulp before she spoke again. "I saw... there's something... Will..."

Will spoke up too, wondering what she could be talking about. "What about me, Eleven?"

"I saw... monster..."

Her voice was shaky again, with both emotion and the signal trying its best to fade. Will tried to focus on keeping the connection alive but it felt he was holding a strand of hair by two ends in his mind that was slowly slipping, breaking away from him. "Where's the

monster El? In your world? Are you safe?" Mike almost screamed into the intercom and stopped pacing around the room.

"Monster... wants Will... with you..."

The signal once again faded into black and the supercom shut off. Mike turned to Lucas, whose eyes were wide and pain-filled, to Dustin who shared the same expression but was more directed at Will. The boy who's travelled to the upside down and found El even further out was now waking up with blood running down his nose and his skin as pale as a corpse. A knock at the door sounded before Jonathan pushed it open. "Hey guys! Dinner is- Will!"

"I'm okay Jonathan, really!" Will pushed himself up weakly and wiped the blood with his sleeve. His older brother pushed him back down and felt his forehead. "Your temperature's okay... what happened?"

"Nothing! I just dozed off and woke up like this..." He pushed Jonathan away and followed his guilty looking friends down the hallway, leaving him alone.

After dinner in front of the TV (homemade meatball subs) Will looked a lot better and relaxed against Jonathan's side, easing the older boys fears in turn. Nothing much was spoken between them but Jonathan noticed the glances between the four boys, and the way they all seemed to be staring through the box at something else entirely. It didn't help that the signal was getting so messed up from the howling forces of nature outside. A heavy bolt of lightning flashed at the window right behind Dustin and he jumped out of his skin into Lucas's arms, said boy pushing him away instantly. The lights flickered on and off for a moment and all four of them stiffened, looking up at the ceiling expectantly.

"You guys are acting stranger than usual... I mean, you know this isn't anything to do with..." Jonathan couldn't find it in himself to mention the name of the young girl that Nancy said they all held dear to their hearts, save for Will who hadn't known her. When they looked at him though, it more than confirmed his fears of what they thought. "Yeah, of course not." Will replied, standing up. "Can we turn the radio on and play cards instead guys? It's too late to start a

campaign..."

"Sounds good!" Lucas agreed, jumping up and following him to the little shelf where the games were. Dustin went back to Will's room to grab the snacks he'd packed and that left Mike and Jonathan in the living room. "Seriously Mike, do you guys think that this weather has anything to do with...?"

He turned to the older boy with a blank expression. "Umm, no. I think it's just a freak storm... But maybe, who knows right?"

He left as well, and Jonathan was once again alone with more questions than answers.

...

"This is an emergency! I repeat, we are experiencing the extreme sustained winds of a minor hurricane and lightning clouds now close enough to make human contact! Do not under any circumstances leave your house or shelter, take cover away from flooding zones..." The storm-warning announcement droned on and on behind Nancy as she stared out the window with a fearful expression. The warning switched back to the swanky news-hosts who all looked as jovial as can be in the face of such extreme natural hazards.

"What we expected was Hurricane Ike aint got nothing on this!" one of them said, throwing his papers to the howling wind behind him and trying to keep his plastic yellow hood from blowing away too. Nancy jumped as lightning struck her lawn, leaving a tiny flaming scorch mark in the almost pitch black that was instantly put out by the sheets of falling water behind it. 'I should call Jonathan...' she thought, closing the curtains behind her and going for the telephone. Just as she picked it up though the lights flickered, in and out, before shutting down completely. "Shit!" she muttered, slamming the now dead phone down and extending her arms out in the pitch-black looking for the kitchen where they kept the candles. It was almost 11pm and that meant her parents were sound asleep in bed, never staying up past 10pm a day in their marital lives.

She found the matches and lit one, scrambling to get to the drawer where she knew the candles were. Once those were lit she shakily

made her way to the basement and pushed boxes around until she saw the heavy-duty torch. She stopped for a moment, spying the little blanket fort near the back door that served as a reminder to all of them of everything that had happened.

"I'll leave a light up there for Mom..."

Nancy made her way back up to her parents' bedroom, where the door was open and the sounds of her mom's soft breathing and dad's light snoring could be heard within.

She left two candles and matches next to them, then went to Holly's room and left a torch for her too. The little girl knew how to use them now and it was just in case.

Outside the rain still poured and the ground quaked slightly. She felt it beneath her feet, the slow, gentle thump that made her little glass ornament wind chime rattle against the window. Seriously, what was that?

When Nancy threw open her curtains a bolt of lightning lit up the world outside and she almost screamed, launching herself backwards as the huge black shadow of an unknown something came into view for a split second near the mountainside.

"Oh god... Mike!"

Panic mode set in and she didn't have time to think about anything else. She grabbed the revolver out from under her bed in the locked case and loaded it with the few rounds she had left. A second trip to the basement and she found the monster-hunting tools they'd used last year. She stuffed her pillows and a wig in her bed to look like she was sleeping and grabbed a second jacket and her folded up storm weather gear before leaving quietly through the front door and braving the harsh elements. "Don't worry Mike, I'll be there!"

...

"Shit shit shit!"

Joyce cursed as she floored it down the straight of the farmer's road before slowing slightly at the corner. "That son of a bitch is back isn't

he? He wants my son? Not without killing me first..."

Hopper was silent beside her, eyes searching in the dark with his sniper rifle cocked back, the end pointing out the half open window. "Just focus on getting us there alive Joyce."

"And that tree just had to fall down our street? Jesus Christ Hop the world's got it out for my family..."

"I know... I know Joyce, you guys have had it rough. But you've survived so far and it won't be any different this time. Not while I'm here."

She followed the winding path that took them on a wide loop around the outskirts of town before it would taper off to the back of the Byers' house. It was the farmers track, very rarely used because it took a twenty minute detour to get to her house. But a huge tree had fallen down on their usual road and the flooding reached a point where stepping out of the truck would likely lead to them being swept away. Plus, Hopper had some heavy equipment sitting on the rare seat that they'd need, guns and ammo cleared from the small weapons vault at the station. They'd gunned it back this way and now were travelling down what would be the most harrowing drive of their lives to date. Hopper had let her take the wheel since she was more familiar with the roads. And while she drove at maniacal speeds he hadn't felt the verge of life and death gripping at his seatbelt... much.

'I know I saw something, it wasn't just a trick of the light...'

Joyce balked when he pulled out the rifle and pointed it out, but he explained the huge shadow he'd seen and she shut up quickly, nudging the gas pedal a little harder.

"Another five minutes and we should be- SHIT!"

Hopper almost fired a shot as she plugged the brakes and their top halves lashed forward. "What the hell Joyce?!"

"Oh god Hop there! Look!"

She threw the door open and pointed into the distance. He followed

her actions and peered into the darkness, before gulping. "This isn't the same monster..."

It cleared the height of the trees easily, the neck of said beast trailing across the sky like a swaying branch, only much too distinct. Its' back turned to the pair, it cut a path with trees bending and falling from its cleared path like they were grass. It was heading straight for the Byers' home.

"Floor it!" Hop shouted as he threw himself back in, Joyce not far behind ready to kick it into top-speed again.

...

The lights cut out with another sizzling crack of lightning and cards dropped out of everyone's hands as they all jumped in their seats. "J-Jonathan?" Will cried, looking around in the darkness. "Just stay there Will! I've got the flashlight in my room..."

"Shit this is bad, this is sooo bad..."

"Yeah it is. Anyone bring their torches?"

"I did, hang on..."

Mike got up and left too, cursing as he kicked the coffee table and tried to find his bag in the living room. A spotlight appeared behind him as Jonathan returned to rummage through a closet for more lights, the older boy first stopping for a second to help him find his own torch.

"Eww gross, Dustin you asshole!"

"Hey I didn't do that on purpose!"

While Lucas and Dustin bickered, because Dustin had left his half-eaten sub too close to Lucas and the boy had jabbed it and got stuff on his arm, Will felt his other senses heighten as he stared into the darkness ahead. He could feel the strange rhythmic vibration of the table beneath his fingers, not in time with the thunder but something all its own. He felt fear strike his heart deeply. "Mike..." he called out with his eyes shut tight.

Said boy came over to him and shined the light over his friend's face. "Will?"

His eyes were still closed and he slumped in his seat, forehead down in deep focus. It brought up painful memories of when they'd brought El to school to tap into the Heath kit Ham shack's signals. "Guys, guys!"

They looked to him and where he spotlighted, before everyone surrounded Will, though no-one shook him. "Why's he going there now?" Dustin whispered, prodding his shoulder. The boy didn't wake up but they heard his supercom crackle to life. Jonathan came in with a pack of candles and one lit, casting a dim light across the room. "What the hell's going on?"

"Mike come in! Over."

"Will, what are you doing?"

Jonathan almost threw the candle down on the table leaving Lucas to carefully keep it from toppling over and dropped to his knees next to Will. "He's not... moving. He's not moving! But he's talking... how?"

"Long-story short Jonathan, Will's got superpowers like Eleven. He can go to the upside down and talk to us there through his radio..." Dustin shrugged but it did nothing to quell Jonathan, who stood up with shaking hands gripping his scalp.

"Oh no... Oh no no no he... he needs to come back now!"

Just as he reached out to shake his little brother awake and Lucas and Dustin stood in front of him and all three younger boys cried out "NO!"

"NO? YOU GUYS ARE INSANE!"

"You can't do that to Will Jonathan! He left for a reason..."

The second supercom in his hand crackled to life again as Will spoke. "They're right Jonathan. I've been coming here long enough that it doesn't scare me. Don't worry, I know what I'm doing!"

Jonathan didn't stop staring at Will's physical body that grew paler, the drop of blood almost ready to fall. "No you don't Will. No you don't! You're so sick still..."

"Coming here... it gets rid of the nightmares. Don't you see Jonathan? I don't need you and Mom sheltering me so much, I need to face my fears!"

...

12. Chapter 12

...

The last word his voice cracked and he stood in the upside down where his brother's thought cloud hovered, feeling all of the complicated emotions of fear, anger and resentment and guilt and worry all at once, it was so much...

"I... Will, I didn't know you felt that way... about me, and Mom."

"You guys are overbearing sometimes. I'm not that fragile, I can still do some things Jonathan... sorry, I need to find Eleven." The signal went silent.

"Will? WILL?!"

Mike was panicking and turned the dials frantically. None of them had even bothered to notice the storm had picked up again and the wind was so strong it knocked the front door open making them all jump up and shout in fright. Benny the dog came in from one of the bedrooms he'd been lying in and growled at the storm outside. He sprinted past Dustin and slipped through the chubby boys fingers. "Hey Benny! Come back here!"

Dustin took two steps in pursuit of Benny and instantly froze as he looked into the night sky, where a flash of white light lit up the open surroundings.

The creature towered over the treeline with three long necks like tree branches. An amber eye blinked at him, he couldn't make out much else at that point but abandoned the crazily barking dog and ran back inside.

"GUYS! THE MONSTER'S HERE! THE MONSTER'S HERE!"

Dustin screamed again and forced all the boys into panic mode. Jonathan bolted from Will's side trying to wake him up and headed for the backdoor. "I need to get the guns!"

"Where is it?!" Lucas and Mike were looking out the window and

when the sky lit up again the jolted back with equally terrified expressions. It wasn't yet outside the house but they knew it was heading for them. "What do we do Mike?" Lucas asked, shaking as he grabbed Mike and Dustin. Their leader gulped, looking around before grabbing a kitchen knife. "We can't run but we can hide and maybe fight!"

"That thing's like a dinosaur though!" Dustin exclaimed as Jonathan returned with the guns. "We'll still kill it. We have to!" Lucas replied bravely, reaching for his nearby bag and pulling out his wrist-rocket. "I saw it on my way to the shed... you'll need this instead." A soaked Jonathan gasped as he handed the loaded air rifle to Lucas, keeping the shotgun to himself.

Will still sat in his seat, limp as a ragdoll as Dustin managed to pick him up and drop him on the couch.

The stomping footsteps were so close at this point they could feel the house shake. Dustin looked out once and it confirmed his worst fears, he was here.

A roaring shriek pierced the already howling storm, its sound almost intermingling with the wind and rain as it stepped out of the treeline and they saw its total form. Black as night, shaped like a lizard but enormous, its torso the size of a truck while its neck rose ten metres up and raised its heads high in the air. They couldn't make out much more of it through the storm. "That son of a bitch isn't getting us!" yelled Jonathan, as he fired a shot. The bullet penetrated the darkness with a meaty thud. The creature shook, but stood still, amber eyes appearing bright as it blinked. It released another roaring shriek before moving forward once again and Jonathan loaded another shot. "Get Will in the back room and take cover now!" he yelled harshly to Mike and Dustin, who nodded dumbly and picked up their limp friend together. Lucas was next to him, shooting his bullets but shaking so much that he had to lean down on his knee to stop every other shot from missing. Their single torch shone on the small patch of shiny, scaly flesh that was now dented from the hard rubber pellets and indented with shrapnel. "It's not working Jonathan, and look!"

Lucas drew the light up and both their stomachs dropped as

something buzzing and huge landed on the neck of the beast. Only its outline appeared from so high up, but it looked like a giant hornet, as in a hornet the size of a dog.

Speaking of, the Byers' dog Benny spotted the giant insect creature and immediately took off with its tail between its legs for Castle Byers, where it was safe and dry.

They fired round after round, in one lucky shot Jonathan pierced an eye of the three headed lizard forcing it to a shrieking stop while Lucas got a pellet to chip at the wing of the flying monster and send it whirling back in the wind. "Jonathan, I'm out of pellets..." Lucas grabbed his friend's older brother's arm and looked up to him. Said boy had dropped his gun to the ground. "Me too buddy..."

They silently spread out their arms in front of the doorway with the rain and wind pelting their faces, a silent moment of understanding between them tonight. They would die nobly, protecting their younger brother/best friends...

...

Nancy couldn't stop in time and swore as she hit the brakes and smashed her hood into the fallen tree ahead of her on Mirkwood, as the boys had nicknamed the road. She was dazed for a moment before getting out with her heavy bag stuffed with all the monster-hunting gear they had left (stakes, pistol rounds, hooks, throwing knives) and with her pistol ready in her holster and trusty bat in hand she braved the swampy forest that had turned into hazardous marshland. "Please be okay Mike! Jonathon you too, and the other kids!" She cried out as she sloshed through the knee deep mud and thanked her quick thinking for putting on rain boots and rain suit over comfortable sweats. Her storm gear helped her cut through the marsh much quicker than if she'd immediately left without a thought as to preparedness. This way she'd be useful...

The journey took almost twenty minutes but she made it through, luckily her time spent trekking through those woods with Jonathan had taught her the routes where she was least likely to be trapped in floodwater induced bogs like quicksand that would swallow her up. She heard the shrieks now, definitely from the monster. And as she

reached the top of the hill near the front side of the house and saw the two shadowy figures standing in front of...

Nancy felt her stomach drop as she craned her neck upwards and felt her nightmares coming true once again. The lizard thing was a black blur that charged right at the Byers' home. Right at Jonathan with his outstretched arms.

"NOOOOOO!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, running forward.

...

He saw Nancy running to him behind the monster. He saw a blinding white light, lightning?

It happened so suddenly... One minute he was screaming "NANCY!" at the top of his lungs and running for her, the next thing the blinding white light hit the monster and literally swept it off its feet. Lightning would have hit his head from above... But that was no lightning.

Joyce stepped out of the now totalled truck whose metal bumper stuck to the mangled two legs on one side of the creature before she pulled out her revolver and fired every round into the... lizard thing. "MOM?!"

"Jonathan!"

Behind her Hopper was pulling the black case out and laying it on the bed of his truck, opening it to reveal the grenade launcher he'd been keeping on him the whole time. "Lucas go check on the others!" Jonathan yelled at the dark-skinned boy who squeaked out an "okay!" before running back inside. The monster was stirring, two of its heads rearing up (the other had been blown to bits by the gunfire). It pulled itself back up and ran at Joyce who was halfway between itself and Jonathan, knocking her to the side. She screamed but managed a tuck and roll before slamming into the fence line. Jonathan tried to make it to her side but was blocked by the monster.

"Come at me freak!" He yelled angrily, waving his hands crazily. "Just charge already!"

The shot that came from the left of it sent fire and flesh everywhere.

The monster harked as it teetered to the side again and Jonathan took that moment to run to his mother as Hopper prepared another grenade, cursing at the long process to unhook the chunks of metal and let it cook and god knows what else what would up before he was ready to shoot again so he tried to load his shotgun as well. He was just trying his very best to avoid shooting the house, where the monster was standing in front but to the side of. He needed to keep his head clear and gaze steady, and also needed Jonathan to move Joyce as there was a very real chance of them being killed by this.

"Chief Hopper look out!"

He dropped to the ground at the girls piercing shriek behind him and the grenade dropped from his hand as a buzzing suddenly filled his ears. A bolt of lightning lit up the menacing creature above, a cross between a scarab beetle with its all black skin and a hornet. And also about the size of a dog...

But the creature appeared for only a second before the clang of metal against a hard surface was heard and suddenly Nancy Wheeler was above him, the bent baseball in her hand, covered in mud from the waist down and soaking wet. She offered a hand and pulled him back up. "I need to check on Mike!"

"They're inside. Go!"

She sprinted away from him, sending a worried glance at Jonathan and Joyce who was now sat up.

...

Mike crouched low beside the bed where Will was lying, trying to get the radio signal back. Dustin had taken the kitchen knife from him and was reporting everything that was happening that he could see from the foggy side window. Lucas rushed in with water dripping from everything and mud up his legs, reporting everything else that happened. "Will's mom and Chief Hopper slammed into the thessalhydra with their truck..."

"WHOA!" Mike and Dustin said in awe. "Yeah it's the thessalhydra alright..." Dustin added, pacing the space of the small room. "And

while Chief and them try to take it down Will's going to get El and bring her back so she can open the gate and push those things back to where they belong. I have this theory guys..."

Dustin turned to them solemnly and sat on Will's left side, watching the blood leaking from both his nostrils now. "You remember when Will told us about throwing up slugs a few months ago? Then eggs and other stuff?"

"Yeah" Lucas replied at the foot of Will's bed, leaning closer to Dustin. "So?"

"Well, we couldn't see any of it but what if it was all still real and just invisible to us? And what if when he talked about having to be a host-body or whatever there were actually invisible eggs in him this whole time?"

"And he hatched them down the sink and they turned into the monsters outside?"

Mike leaned against the window, a sinking feeling in his chest. "If that's the case, it means there's more..."

They had no time to dwell on the thought as the buzzing sound grew loud and heavy above their heads. "The living room!" Mike shouted, pulling Will over his shoulder with Lucas helping him and Dustin behind them just as the window smashed behind them and a flash of red eyes and black bugs legs peeked out behind the curtains. They slammed the door and turned the corner with Will still unconscious and slammed into another body.

"Ugggh... Mike? Mike!"

Nancy jumped up and pulled her brother up and into her arms. "Nancy you came!"

His grateful smile was there for only a second before the panic returned. Lucas and Dustin had resumed the task of tending to Will and put him upright on the couch. "Yeah, like I promised..." She squeezed his shoulder before turning to the others. "What's wrong with Will?"

"Nothing. He's looking for Eleven..."

"Long story." Lucas answered her questioning gaze shaking his head. Another roaring shriek made them all turn to the front door. Nancy looked out the window and her mouth dropped and eyes widened.

"Oh shit, there's another one!"

"What are we going to do?" Dustin asked, real tears in his eyes now as he felt their slim hopes at surviving slipping away.

"I need to go outside and help. You think you'll be okay?"

"Yes." Mike replied, more confident than he felt. "Go."

Nancy shot him a brief smile before taking off and closing the door behind her.

...

"Well, this is going to be tough..." Lucas breathed out and picked up his wrist rocket and small pile of rocks again. "We'll get through this guys..." Mike said with a steely resolve in his eyes before he brought the supercom to his mouth for the hundredth time. "Will! Do you read? Will! WILL!"

The radio sprang to life on its own and all three boys cheered. "I read! Mike, I've found her."

"Can she talk to us?"

His voice was raspy and he coughed, away from the monitor, before returning. "I can't hold the connection. Right now, there's a gate I'm trying to keep open. It's slipping too... EL HURRY!" The signal faded out again and Mike wanted to throw the radio in frustration.

"Mike! Lucas!"

Dustin's frantic voice cut their conversation short and they came over to him as he leaned against the door between the kitchen and hallway. "I can hear the buzzing- SHIT!"

13. Chapter 13

...

He jolted back as sharp needles punched through the door like a knife through butter. The explosive action of thunder and gunshot and howling of the storm outside was suddenly drowned out, replaced by the incessant drone noise coming through the large holes made by the giant hornets.

"They're gonna get through, what do we do!" Dustin cried in terror, backing away as they stabbed once again and shook the door on its hinges. Said door stood between the kitchen and hallway, blocking their back exit. The front door only led to the still approaching thesselhydra that hadn't been defeated yet.

"There's nothing else we can do, we have to kill those sons of bitches!" Lucas declared, pulling out the sharp rocks he'd brought over from his bag and preparing his wrist-rocket. "Leave it to me."

"There's three of them!" Dustin deduced as he peeked through one of the holes made by their backend needles. "Shine the torch light through for me." Lucas ordered, taking the kitchen knife from Mike's hand first before moving to position as Dustin did what he'd asked. "What are you doing?" Mike asked in confusion. His concern was quickly shushed as Lucas carved a slightly bigger hole in the door.

"I can shoot through this." he explained, eyes never leaving the frantically needling drones still slamming against them on the other side of the door, trying to widen the holes. "Just keep the light shining on their eyes!"

He calmed himself and took aim, counting the seconds between each beat and focussing on the red shimmer of a demonic eye that appeared every time one of them came close. One of them had paused, getting ready for its run-up from the end of the hall to the door, visible in the torchlight Dustin kept steady above Lucas's head.

"Ready. Aim. Fire!"

He'd released the sharp pebble just as it started rushing and managed to score a direct hit to the eye. It burst from a distance in a splatter of brownish-red pus and blood and Lucas felt like throwing up and whooping at the same time. "One down..."

He made short work of the other one, clipping its wings so it dropped to the ground and buzzed in circles like a crazy spinning top. There was only one left, but it dodged all of Lucas's next shots deeming them ineffective.

"Kill it kill it kill it!" Michael yelled, as Dustin added "It's coming back again, hurry up Lucas!"

"I'm doing it, just hold on!" Lucas yelled at his friends, quieting them so he could focus again.

With his last stone he drew it back and waited until the needle just pulled out of the widening hole before releasing. It resulted in a head-shot, dazing the creature on the other side. Lucas stabbed his knife through and jabbed its eye so it fell to the ground, crashing into the one spinning's path.

"Lucas, the hole's big now!" Dustin cried in warning, as the last slam caused weak wood to crumble down and a giant hole was now apparent in the door.

"I got this." He grabbed the kitchen knife with a hand at the doorknob, ready as the hornets rose up again, together. They were weakened considerably but still tried to slam into the door, fighting to get through the hole at once.

Lucas pushed the door open at that moment and sent them into the back wall. The sound of them being crushed between the door, like scrunched up tinfoil and a high-pitched whine, the hornet's version of a scream, could be heard. They flailed to the ground with their exoskeletons severely cracked.

Lucas slammed the door into them again and again, stabbing the knife wildly into the darkness at the same time. When the buzzing stopped and all they could hear was the chaos outside again, he finally shut the door for good, dusting his hands off. Dustin ran up to

hug him and he accepted it. "Thought out and fought out like a warrior brother!"

"That was awesome Lucas!" Mike grabbed his other shoulder and side-hugged him too, proud of his friend. He was chuffed at the praise, happy, but distracted as he remembered the tasks they still had to do in his head.

"Thanks. We've gotta get back to Will though, help me block this hole in case they get up again..."

They decided to move the fridge in front of the door, working together to push it over before re-joining their still unconscious friend.

...

"EL, HURRY!"

El was running as fast as she could, heaving in deep breaths and looking all around for the exit. "WHERE?!"

"HERE!"

She kept running until far off in the distance there was a tiny speck of light visible. She felt a sharp tug at her heart and soul, drawing her towards it. "I'M COMING!"

El mustered every last bit of her energy into a final sprint towards the dimming light. It was the only reference point she had in this world of black.

She gasped as she reached the shadowy figure standing in front of the portal and launched herself at him. It was a high leap from her own ground, forcing her to grab at the frail arms of the sickly looking boy with blood running down his face and chin and bluish lips smiling at her. Will's face was pale as a sheet, eye shadows prominent and chestnut hair plastered to his forehead with perspiration. "Eleven, I finally found you!"

"Hi, Will..." she hugged the smaller body to her and looked around, "Upside-down?"

"It was the only way I could find you El. We can't really talk here, you need to go back to the normal world and help us there, everyone's in trouble." Will said, leaning back onto the hard rock surface beside the portal and grabbing her hand.

"Go back?" she asked with confusion, "how?"

Will was almost totally drained from the effort it had taken rip through time and space in an even more unknown universe than the upside down. But still, he could muster up the last of his energy to bring them both back as he felt himself drifting apart. "You can follow my spirit..."

She felt her eyes widen as she gripped the boy's hand tighter. His body was becoming opaque in front of her, the atoms shifting and rising like smoke. "Don't leave!"

"You're coming with me Eleven, hold on..."

...

Outside Hopper had launched another grenade at the already heavily damaged thessalhydra, but it was still very much alive. He was so distracted reloading that he didn't react fast enough to the scream behind him. A sharp blow came to his stomach, knocking him to the side in a similar fashion as with Joyce.

Nancy picked up the shotgun behind him and fired the rounds already loaded, her dead-shot skills making short work of one of the heads. But it also made the other two heads angrier, she realised with a gulp...

"NANCY!"

From its side the weakened monster received another walloping blow by a stone. Jonathan jabbed at the already torn flesh of its neck with more thrown rocks and made it rear up in anger and turn towards him.

"Jonathan, lead him away from the house!" Nancy shouted, pointing at Hopper who was loading another round. He nodded and they headed for the trees waving their arms wildly. It didn't budge though,

instead focusing on the woman straight ahead with her pistol in one hand and axe raised in defence.

"Come closer motherfucker, I dare you!" Joyce warned, the maniacal glint returning to her eyes in full effect. The monster took the dare, building up to a run as the teenagers either side screamed "NO!"

The explosion hit its' backside making it rear up in agony as its sister had done earlier. Joyce threw her axe with all her might and it pierced the centre neck sending blood to rain down above her. But still, it approached. Or more like it was thrown forwards, in immense pain but driven towards its ultimate goal of getting to the house...

Joyce tried to push forward but was thrown to the side like a ragdoll a second time, rolling to a stop near Nancy and feeling too dazed to get up. With its last shuddering step forward it finally managed to reach the house...

...

The front of the roof caved in and all the boys cried out in fear, backing away from the front door where the falling debris was heaviest. A succession of heavy thuds sounded before the roof was ripped open above them a set of amber eyes, large and unblinking, peered through the gaping crack with the storm coming in behind it.

"Get Will!" Lucas yelled as he threw the kitchen knife he had and everything else he could at it, books, plates and cups. None of it had much of an effect, the creature ignoring the trivial objects as it looked around in the darkness. The hornets were still dead but the fridge blocked them from getting to the backdoor. The only option they had at this point was trying to fight.

It sniffed the air once, twice, and there...

The strong scent of its own world wafted off the sleeping one, familiar even to one who'd never seen the world it came from. It reared its head up again, ready to dive down and pick up Will, its key to returning to the home world.

Lucas and Dustin came from either side and hacked at its face with

what they'd find, a broken bottle and a broomstick handle. They were swept back mercilessly though, forced to cower back towards Mike, who stood over Will with a horror-stricken face. They'd done everything in their power to survive...

The rain poured in behind the two living heads that reached down, lightning flashing every second giving a freeze frame view of their approaching doom.

Suddenly the body behind them shuddered as Will coughed out loud and breathed in a huge gasp. They grabbed him as his eyes opened, bloodshot and wide. "SHE'S HERE!"

...

The monster sniffed the air again and froze, its heads stopping right in front of the boys before turning around and looking up into the sky. The smell of home... so pungent now it felt like it was there, breathing in the death and decay of a rotting world it belonged to. But it wasn't coming from the sleeping one, now awake. There was another, high up in the sky...

The next lightning strike tore through the roof above and a second gaping hole appeared, releasing the storm upon them and causing them to stare up into the sky above. It was hard to tell from so high above at first, but a slip of shadowy human seemed to appear briefly in their vision.

"Is that... El?" Mike asked hesitantly, expression dazed as his eyes bulged. He didn't look away from the view above for a second, afraid to. "Yes..." Will replied through raspy breaths as he looked around and noticed the state of their house and the monster in front of them, who also seemed to be distracted by the sky. "I can't believe... this was happening... while I was out..."

Will felt the darkness closing in again but couldn't fight it, his efforts exhausted from his time in the upside-down. He fainted against Dustin, who promptly picked him up again under the legs and back. "Now's our chance to escape! While it's distracted we gotta find a way out."

"Through the window!" Lucas suggested, moving to the side and kicking open one of the small shutters before clambering out and dropping down. "Hand Will out to me! Mike... Mike? MIKE!"

The boy had disappeared from their sight. "MIKE!" Dustin called out, spinning around with Will in his arms before he spotted the tails of the boy's jacket from the hole in the roof above them. He'd climbed the couch and grabbed at the edge of the hole above, using the little strength he had to haul himself up. "MIKE, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!"

"YOU GUYS CAN GET AWAY! I'VE GOTTA HELP EL!" he called down dismissively, steadying himself with his legs propped against the edge of the hole.

"MIKE NO!" Lucas yelled out, trying to reach the window ledge again. "Help me get back in Dustin!"

"Leave him! We've got Will." Dustin went over to the window himself and kicked at the already damaged hinges of the shutters. Eventually the whole wooden-framed panel dropped to the ground and left a large square to climb through.

It made it easier to drop Will as gently as he could down to Lucas, before he rolled off the ledge himself and descended about six feet to the ground with little more than ground-shock. The lawn below them was covered in shattered glass and splinters.

They looked around for a moment, mindful of the almost dead monster on the ground in the distance, while the other one like it was still staring up at El. They then sighed in relief at the human figures approaching. "WILL!"

Joyce reached them and pulled the fainted boy to her chest, leaving Lucas and Dustin free to continue assessing the situation and their environment. Jonathan and Nancy became visible to them about a hundred yards away, hacking at the one that was almost dead.

Hopper was closer, loading his last grenade, though he seemed distracted staring up at the sky too. Dustin looked up too and let out a whooping cry of delight as the figure became more apparent, low

enough for them to recognise her. "Lucas, it really is El!"

Lucas was mindful of several dots distant from them, gulping loud enough for his friend to hear, even in the storm. "Those hornet things... there's more! And it looks like they're going after her!" he cried in alarm, pointing them out.

...

The trip home had felt like she was drifting through nowhere again. It made her panic for the few seconds it lasted. But then El realised she could still feel the sensation of Will's hand in hers, like he was guiding her. And it calmed her long enough to make it through the universes.

Now El was here, home in her own world or at least not the upside-down, and she wasn't sure exactly where she was. The forest and a patch of ground were far below her, but everything else was too dark and noisy from the storm for her to make out her surroundings.

She breathed in deeply, feeling the rain wash over and the crackling electricity around her... Power, energy, she could feel again. The cold and wet were wonderfully refreshing after her time spent in nothing...

When the hornet-like creatures came flying up she simply brought a hand up and focussed. Her head dropped as she looked for their innards with her mind, and then prodded.

Ripping her hand to the side forced their insides from their bodies, splattering out into a million particles that carried themselves away into the storm.

From far below everyone was watching her take out the monsters like they were nothing. Mike, Lucas and Dustin were especially in awe at her effortless deconstruction of the hornets, the same Lucas had tried so hard to kill.

The five that had tried an initial attack were gone and the five behind them stopped, now too hesitant to approach. She made short work of them, breaking their necks and wings off so they followed their

brethren as separating matter to be carried off by the wind.

El then looked down, where far below her the giant lizard creatures could be seen. 'Getting weak...'

Her breathing was laboured. Watery blood ran from her nose and ears as one of the creatures below had extended its necks upwards and let out a familiar clicking noise, like that of the Demogorgon. There were people down there, people in danger...

Electricity struck the air in front of her, startling her. El decided to ignore her exhaustion for the time being, she had work to do right now.

Another lightning bolt came down right after the first and this time her hands reached out and shoved. A force, her force, pushing the bolt from the side and redirecting its course. It struck a tree below, not exactly what El wanted...

Below, the monster was still staring up at her, still sniffing the air as its neck extended as high as it could go. This one had the scent of home world fresh on its skin, the monster realised. This one would be more help in getting back home!

El tried again, pulling the lightning down and pushing it to the side where it struck the thesselhydra that was almost dead. Nancy and Jonathan leaped back as the bolt hit it.

The impact of the bolt shook the ground beneath them, before the monster finally stopped twitching and lay its heads back to rest. Black smoke rose to the air as its body caved in on itself. "That has to be it! Come on Nancy, we need to find our brothers!" Jonathan yelled, grabbing Nancy's hand and dragging her away.

...

Hopper fired his last grenade but it landed in a puddle, hissing and sputtering out shrapnel before exploding with only a quarter of its usual power. He cursed, pulling his shotgun out again with the last round of ammo in it as he caught up to Jonathan and Nancy who were running towards Joyce and the boys. "Do you see her?!" Nancy

asked loudly as she stared up at the sky. Both men, younger and older, nodded.

"Yeah, it's El!" Dustin and Lucas called excitedly when they heard the trio talking as they arrived. Beside them a slowly waking Will looked weakly up at his mother, smiling. "I brought her back Mom, and I'm not scared anymore..."

"Yeah Ms Byers, he faced his fears in the upside down!" Dustin exclaimed.

"And figured out how to find Eleven, and bring her back!" Lucas added. Joyce smiled and kissed her boy. He was still lying weakly against her getting soaked, but at least he was breathing normally and semi-awake. He was such a brave boy...

"We need to get to the truck..." Joyce decided, "All of us, come on!" Jonathan grabbed his brother from his mom while Nancy looked around, "Hold on, where's Mike?!" she asked frantically.

"On the roof, waiting for El to come down." Dustin replied, while Lucas pointed silently to the rooftop. Nancy backed up as far as she could in the yard as Joyce and Jonathan moved Will into the truck. Hopper still had his gun out, aimed at the remaining monster just in case it turned towards them again and Lucas and Will were halfway between heading to the truck and watching out for Mike who was still on the roof.

The ground shook for what seemed the hundredth time that night, only this time it came with a burst of lightning so bright the world seemed to become day. It was the biggest they'd seen that night, aimed directly at the remaining thessellhydra.

It couldn't move back in time, the brightness struck the top of its head and energy coursed through its body, stopping its lifeline immediately. The monster flailed back and forth before raggedly before dropping to the ground in defeat.

The heads whipped back and forth in the air before dropping on the roof of the house, forcing it to shake violently as the panels above slid down, some of them dropping to the ground. Mike yelled as his

footing came way and he clung to the apex of the roof, his feet scrabbling at the slippery wet surface beneath to stay upright.

...

Nancy was the first to spot his dangling figure and cried out in dismay, "NO MIKE!" Dustin and Lucas were also yelling in fear, running around the monsters and reaching the broken window before Dustin vaulted Lucas up and into the living room again.

Mike was still staring up into the sky, but he'd regained his footing and his arms were now outstretched. He could see the figure falling, it was only a matter of time before she reached him...

When the last of her power drained she didn't notice until it was too later. El was crying blood now, the filthy brown rags that covered her body wet and clinging to her, skirts whipping about her legs as the ground approached fast beneath her.

'Hurt it... Did it...'

She smiled as the dying monsters passed her view. It was over now, she'd helped defeat them as Will had asked, thinking that the people she could see now, so close to the ground, were probably Dustin and Lucas. Friends from this world... and there was Joyce... and Will, being carried by a bigger version of him. Mike's pretty sister next to the big man named Hopper. Where was Mike?

She was seconds from the ground when she spotted him, arms outstretched beneath her. It was in that moment that she panicked, wanting to pull herself back and stop herself hurting him, thinking that she was going to die probably. But she didn't want him to die, and didn't want it to be because of her...

"NOOOOO!"

"EL! I'VE GOT YOU!"

It wasn't enough time. She failed to stop falling and instead stretched her arms out as well, accepting her fate of slamming into him like concrete from who knows how high of a drop.

They were on the roof... they went through a hole, making it bigger... they were tumbling down and down, rolling... she fell on something bony and heard a sickening crunch and felt hard and soft and lumpy and pointy beneath her all at once, but there were arms around her shoulders and a softness in her face and other hands covering her head.

When the terrifying experience of falling stopped she was completely numb. There were things broken for sure, well not for sure since she couldn't feel. The spots of white in her eyes blocked most of everything, but she registered a shadow above her as piles of rubber came down. Something was shielding her....

"...El..."

He leaned above her, one elbow leant forward while the other bent at an odd angle. His hair was a mess, a gash on his neck long and also bleeding profusely. He looked just as damaged as she felt, and it made her want to scream even though she was too tired to do anything but cry.

Blood came from his mouth and dripped to the ground by her head, but he was still smiling through clenched crimson teeth and lips. "El, it's okay..."

"Mike..." she whispered, fighting the exhaustion as she reached a hand up. Before it got to him he collapsed to the side in a broken heap. She felt her sobs increasing, despairing at the fact that she couldn't even turn her head to look at him.

"MIKE!"

There was another voice, shrill and girlish. "ELEVEN!"

"Eleven!" "Mike!"

People surrounded them, lifted them. She watched Mike being lifted up by his sister and two friends, sharing the weight between them as they took him to the big hole in the wall and lifted him out. Nancy was yelling at him to stay awake and crying hysterically as they carried him to the truck.

She was being carried there too, by the big man Hopper, and in front of her Mike woke up and started talking back to Nancy and she cried out in relief and hugged him. The warm smile of Hopper was above her and she tried to copy it.

"It's alright now. You're home..." he said with a quiet tone. The next thing she felt was the rough leather of the truck on her back, the feel of Mike's arm pressed against hers as they were squeezed into the back seat next to a still-fainting Will with Joyce crouched over checking on all of them.

Hopper was in the front seat and Nancy and Dustin sat next to him, while a thud and bark of and in the truck-bed indicated Jonathan and Lucas (who'd grabbed the Byers dog) were there.

Mike was awake and prodding her arm, but she felt too sore to look over at him and only lifted the corners of her mouth in a responsive smile. "Mike."

"Oh, you're okay. Hi El." He replied weakly. "Just checking..."

They headed off to the hospital and she slipped back into unconsciousness, finally feeling safe and warm with everyone around her.

...

Author's notes:

#NoonediesIjustliketowritedramatic

#Especiallynohousepetsinmystories

#Bennywassafethewholetime

#HaveImentionedInamedBennythedogafterthedinerchefElmetinthebeginning

This chapter would be the end of the 'Return of El' story. Anything after is sort of fluffy, sort of tying up loose ends. 'El: After'. Questions to be answered:

Normal life for El?

What about the Byers home?

Where is El's birthmother?

Another story-arc with new characters?

Snowball?

Questions to be ignored (coz I'm too lazy to give them a decent explanation):

How exactly do Will's powers work?

What is the upside-down really, and where is nowhere?

Thanks for reading!

...

14. Chapter 14

...

"Idiot..."

She raked through her hair and looked up at the clock again as she let the nurse come in and wrap up the gash in her arm. Jonathan was at her side having his own wounds tended to, and beside him were Lucas and Dustin, drifting off to sleep. They'd come out of it completely uninjured, save for the traumatic experience.

"Nancy, your brother wants to see you..." another nurse peeked their head through the door of the waiting room and she stood up again. "My parents should be here in 10 minutes, if you see them please tell them where we are."

"No problem." The nurse squeezed her shoulder before leaving and she entered the room down the hallway she'd been directed to.

It was small, just big enough for the bed and chairs but she ignored all of it and pulled her brother into another hug, avoiding his left side and neck which were set in a cast and brace. "That was so stupid! She came down from so high, it could've killed you..."

"It could've killed her..." he replied weakly, scrunching his bruised face up in both pain and defensive anger.

She bit her lip and leaned back. "You're still stupid."

"You're stupider!"

"You're the stupidest!"

Despite the situation they couldn't help but crack smiles at each other. Nancy shoved his good shoulder and shook her head, assessing him for damage. The nurse said it was just a broken arm and dislocated shoulder. Everything else was bruising, with no internal or other serious injuries.

Mike's smile dropped as he looked at the door. "Is El okay? Is Will?"

"I think Will's fine... I don't know about Eleven. Joyce is with them both in the emergency room..."

His face showed deep concern, dark eyes turning to hers for a moment. "I hope she gets to stay with us..."

Nancy ruffled his hair, gently. "I doubt Mom and Dad would let her stay. But you know Chief Hopper won't leave her. Maybe the Byers' will have her..."

A few minutes later Mr and Mrs Wheeler burst through the door with Holly in his arms while she threw herself at her son. "Mike! Oh my baby what happened to you?"

"Mom it's okay! I'm okay." Mike grumbled, awkwardly patting his mother who cried into his hair while kissing him repeatedly. "No you're not, look at you! Where are the nurses? And Nancy, you were hurt too?"

"They're just cuts Mom, they'll heal." Nancy stuffed her bandaged hands in her pockets and smiled reassuringly at her mother

"Why did you sneak out, Nancy?" Ted asked, putting Holly onto the bed and also checking his son, who looked up at him guiltily. "And how did you two get hurt exactly?"

So began the long, made up story they agreed between all of them to tell. Hopper had tried to drive Joyce home and they got caught in a ditch on the backroads and banged up something fierce. The Byers' home was struck by lightning and it made a giant hole in the roof, which they'd tried to fix themselves. Mike fell from the top, breaking his arm and shoulder on the way down. Will was always sickly and a hospital regular, his state explained simply as the storm scaring him so much he knocked into something.

And they hadn't mentioned El. It wouldn't be necessary since she was out of sight in emergency care.

Ted shook his head and picked up his youngest daughter, who'd fallen asleep again in his arms. "It's been a tough night for you, son..."

Mike shrugged, leaning back in his hospital bed as Nancy returned

from outside, his mother smoothing out the blanket covers he'd slipped into. "The doctor's on his way..."

His parents sighed and shook their heads. "We'll talk more about this at home Mike." Karen decided firmly, "but you Missy, you're in trouble for leaving without telling us!"

"I was just going to the Byers home to check on Mike!" Even with her loose alibi Nancy took the lecture on not keeping her whereabouts a secret and Mike took his about the dangers of climbing on rooves.

Then the doctor came in and explained Mike would have to stay overnight. "He can't be released just yet I'm sorry to say, Mr and Mrs Wheeler. We have a spare cot if one of you would like to sleep over?"

"I guess I... but Holly..." Karen looked unsure, and Nancy took that moment to step in. "Let me! Mom. You need to be home for Holly and Dad, and I'll call you every hour, if you want..."

Karen raised an eyebrow at her, but eventually conceded. "I suppose... don't let him out of your sight, and answer the phone when I call or you're grounded for an extra three weeks."

"Fine Mom. And I'm sorry we made you worry..." Nancy hugged her mother, dragging Mike into it as well. Ted had already left to wait in the car with a quiet goodbye and sleeping child in his arms.

They were interrupted by Joyce peeking through the door. "Will and El are doing fine, but they're sleeping now. I thought you should know..."

"El?" Karen wondered, looking at the other woman and her children questioningly. "Can we see them?" Mike asked excitedly, struggling to get out if his covers. "Wait no, you should be resting!" Karen stated, making sure he stayed down. "I'm sorry Mike, they won't let you in there. We'll see in the morning though, okay?"

Mike nodded through his glum expression. "What about Dustin and Lucas?"

"Their parents came and picked them up. But they'll be back in the morning." Joyce sat down next to Karen. "I think now's the time to

explain the whole Eleven situation with your mother though..."

"I would like to know. This wouldn't have anything to do with you hiding that fugitive girl in our basement last year would it Michael?" Karen asked, arms crossed as she stared down her guilty looking son. With a sigh, he began the long story. "See, when Will went missing, we found this girl in the woods outside his home..."

The story was botched in places, as Mike avoided as much as he could that would get Lucas and Dustin in trouble (like a true friend would). Joyce didn't know a lot of the details but ended up nodding along, only Nancy knew of the boys' misdemeanours, but she stayed quiet.

"My kids owe their lives in part to yours, Karen..." Joyce said, placing a warm hand on her shoulder as she made her way out of the hospital after bidding her kids goodnight. She'd just been stunned by the fantastic story her son told of a telekinetic girl and their attempts to find her in another universe. If it was true, she'd need some time to really think things over...

"Do they? I suppose... there's a lot you haven't told us still, right?"

Joyce nodded silently, her grip tightening. "It's all for your own safety. The less you know about this, the better..."

The two friends went way back, having grown up in that small town together, although Joyce was two years younger so they'd run in different social circles. When their sons became best friends their bond was cemented. "I'm trusting you to keep them safe Joyce."

"I know Karen... Thank you." Joyce hugged her tightly before waving her and the Wheeler family car off as they drove into the night.

...

Mike and Nancy didn't actually sleep that night, preferring to stay up and talk about everything that happened until the nurses brought in breakfast at 7am and a phone call from their mother. Nancy took it and reassured her that everything was fine, before hanging up with the promise that they'd be ready to see her in two hours. Lucas and

Dustin burst through the doors at 8am on the dot. "Dude you look awful!" "Holy shit! Can I sign your cast first?"

"Hey guys!" Mike accepted the eager hugs to either side and they immediately began talking over each other. "Wasn't last night totally awesome?" "Oh man Will needs to draw a whole comic book about our adventures..." "And you rescued El!" "Dude you looked totally badass coming down through the roof!" "You were a badass with the wrist-rocket!" "Hey, I made a great lookout right?"

"Guys! You should save all that talk for Will and Eleven."

Nancy walked through the door again with Jonathan at her side, both grinning. "You guys can see them now. Quietly..." Jonathan warned, and with eager cheers Mike was helped up by Nancy and followed his friends down the hallway and five doors down.

"Let's just watch from the side?" Nancy suggested, after Joyce let the boys pile in and chided them for their over eagerness. "Sure." Jonathan pulled a chair over and sat on it, letting her lean on the arm.

"Byers!"

Lucas and Dustin went to Will first and clasped his hand, cheering before they looked over at El who was also trying to sit up and smile. "Hello." she whispered softly.

"Boys! Not too rough, she's in a lot of pain right now." Joyce warned, even with the soft smile and joyfully teary eyes at seeing both Will and El happy. "Oh... hey Eleven, it's awesome to see you." Dustin hugged her gently and she smiled wider, patting his shoulder. Lucas came over and waited patiently for his hug. "Eleven, you're home!"

"Home..." she smiled through the breathing tube before turning to her other side, where Mike stood quietly after hugging Will. "Mike..."

Lucas and Dustin backed away towards Will, who was eager to talk about how awesome he'd been, they'd all been.

Eleven tried to lean forward in her baggy hospital gown, face clear of mud and grime with small bandages on the cuts she'd sustained. She

groaned in pain though, blanket falling down to expose the bandaged parts of her abdomen where several ribs had been broken. "Eleven honey, please lean back. I'll raise the bed see?" Joyce pressed against her gently and then pushed a button so the bed sat her up enough to look at the concerned Mike. Neither of them let the pain deter from each other though, grimaces turning quickly to wide and teary-eyed smiles.

"Missed you..."

"Missed you too." Mike replied, sitting up on the bed and wrapping his right, good arm gently around her shoulders. He leaned into her shoulder, before noticing the strands tickling his cheek and leaning back. "Your hair is long now."

She frowned a little, but he smiled and petted the brown strands with light patches that fell down her forehead and behind her ears. "Really pretty."

"Thank you." Tears welled in her eyes and she released one, pointing at his cast. "You're hurt..."

"Oh, this? It's just a broken arm, it'll get better..." Mike waved away the injury but Eleven didn't smile again, her expression growing sadder. "Saved me..." she whispered, looking down at the sheets she was gripping feeling immensely guilty, "but I hurt you..."

"El." Her hand was covered by his and she looked up into his smiling eyes. "It's okay. You saved me remember? And Dustin and Lucas, you saved us plenty of times. We... I owed you this. But you know what'll make it better?" He said, lifting her palm up and curling his thumb around hers.

"What?" she asked quietly.

"If you promise stay here with me... I mean, with us. To be around to protect us from any more monsters, like you did last night... And also, to be our friend."

She smiled even wider, "Promise."

...

"That's pretty damn cute... but I need to go check with my parents, they should be here soon." Nancy said in a hushed voice as they talked and watched Joyce exit the room and their brothers out of the corners of their eyes. "Me and Mom stayed here last night, I need to go home and get some things, later..." Jonathan replied.

'At least the storm's died down...' she thought, looking outside to the calming wind and normal falling rain. "I'll be back soon."

Nancy left the room and found her mom outside the with Joyce and Dustin and Lucas's parents. It was up to her and Joyce to assure them everyone was doing fine. Eventually Mike, Lucas and Dustin were also dragged out of the room to speak to their parents, leaving just the two patients and Joyce. She was thinking about Hopper, who was taking care of other business. He'd promised to return with some papers they'd been working on together for a couple of months... the adoption papers.

"Earth to Mom?"

She turned to Will, with his slightly smiling face and huge eyes staring unblinking at her. "Yeah son?"

"El wants to know who's going to take her home..."

Never mind how he knew that when she'd not said anything. Her eyes shifted from him and Joyce to back again, just as unblinking as his. "We are son. El, we want you to come stay with us, me and Will and Jonathan... would you like to?"

El simply nodded, reaching out her arms for Joyce to hug her and whisper nice words into her ears. The warmth her soon-to-be mother gave was one of her favourite things...

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15. Chapter 15

...

Monday 7th May, 1984

...

Repairs needed to be done. Not just on the Byers' home but several homes across Hawkins had felt the effects of the storm that swept across and ravaged the land. Right at that moment volunteers lined the streets with shovels and cars ready to help clear the roads of debris and fill in potholes left by the lightning. The school gym was left open as a shelter but was almost completely empty by now. School was out for the week ahead too, as people sought to rebuild their lives.

"I'm sorry you couldn't go with the Byers just yet El, but I hope you'll like staying with us... again..." Karen Wheeler led the young girl into the house, Mike behind her and Nancy behind him with Holly in her arms. "What did you tell Dad, Mom?" Nancy asked, quietly, even though she knew he wasn't home and at work by now.

"I told him that we were doing our part to help the community by letting her stay with us." Karen replied. "You know where the basement is right? There's a bed down there, it's yours now."

"Thank you..." The young girl tried to smile through her tears that threatened to fall, and upon Karen's allowance immediately left to go down there with Mike. Karen still marvelled at the strange girl, who in only two days had somehow managed to heal the damage done to her ribcage. It was proclaimed miraculous by the doctors, though Joyce and Hopper did their best to keep such news quiet from the few media reporters that roamed outside documenting the storm effects.

The older woman sighed, grabbing her youngest daughter's hand and leading her upstairs. Nancy followed close behind her, "Did you tell him anything else about Eleven?"

Her mom shook her head. "As far as he knows she's an orphan from another county whose foster home was swept away in the flood... I'm playing it off as another charitable cause... You understand?"

"O-of course Mom. But honestly? I never expected you to be so... cool, about this."

Holly was put in her room with her toys to occupy her. Nancy sat on the tiny 4 year olds princess bed, next to her mom, and grabbed her hand. "Neither did I. But Joyce convinced me, and then I saw her with the boys, how they treated her and how she is with them... and after I heard her story..."

She almost teared up again. "The Byers' house is in shambles right? They can't have her right now at Chief Hopper's, but we can."

"Yeah mom, you'll never see a better-behaved Mike after this as well..." Nancy teased. "Not that I need to remind you of that speech he gave on why we should have her, you were there."

He'd given it after she'd made the first offer to take Eleven in, bursting into the room with gusto and hurting his arm even more. After Chief Hopper had arrived at the hospital that morning, three days after they'd been admitted, to tell them just how banged up the Byers' home had been by 'the storm'...

The two women laughed a little together and stood up. "It'll be fine Mom. They'll fix up the house in a month tops and move back in with her. You're doing a great thing..."

El stood there, looking at the small folder bed in the corner where the blanket fort used to be. "The furnace is down here so when it gets cold you won't feel it. And it's got all the blankets from the fort! I thought you'd like that. Do you... like it?" Mike asked as he looked back at her.

She simply smiled, her tears gone as she tested the softness of the thick layers of blankets by sitting on them. "I like it."

"That's good. So umm... it's lunchtime soon. Just you wait til you try Mom's meatloaf!"

She nodded again and followed him back upstairs, to her new life of somewhat normalcy.

...

Wednesday 9th May, 1984

...

The Byers' had moved into Chief Hoppers' home, at his request. It was too small for a mother and two boys, one almost a man, and there was only one bedroom. But it would have to do for then. Joyce came from the bathroom, freshly showered with her purse under her arm as she gratefully took the cup of coffee Jonathan poured him. "Thanks son. You need a ride anywhere before I go?"

"No thanks. Nancy's picking me up..."

Both Joyce and Will raised their heads from their spots on the small table. "Really? Well, have fun with that..." she teased, an eyebrow raised as she sipped her coffee. Jonathan shook his head, leaning on the couch closest to them. "It's not a date or anything! She wanted to come with me to check out the flood damage... It's for next week's paper."

"I didn't say anything about a date honey." The teasing smile was still there but her eyes turned to her youngest son instead. "You wanna go to Mike's today? His mom even mentioned something about a sleepover being okay..."

"She did? Oh well, yeah... I guess that'd be cool." Will tried to play it nonchalant as usual but eagerly stood up to grab some things from his suitcase to throw in his backpack, just in case there actually was a sleepover, which meant they could carry on last week's campaign. Usually Mike would improvise, adding stuff that would extend their adventure, on weekend nights when they didn't have to wake up early. They'd once stayed up past midnight even...

"I'm going there to see El anyways. And since Jonathan isn't going to be watching you..." Joyce added casually.

"Is El going to school with us Mom?" Will asked, buttering his toast.

"Not yet, Hop has to take her files in and sort them out with the government..."

As she said this Joyce pursed her lips. She was still angry at Hawkins' lab and what they almost let happen to her son, and angry at the government for its association with them, no matter how many times the higher-ups claimed they didn't know about it. Didn't know about stolen babies and lost sons and alternate dimensions...

"Did they teach her school stuff in the lab, like reading and writing?" Jonathan asked, now curious about his adopted sister who'd be living under their roof with them, as soon as it was fixed. "I've no idea. I'm talking to her about all of that today. If need be there's home-schooling, and Scott Clarke is a certified home-teacher right? We can hire him maybe..."

"Mr Clarke can be her teacher? Whoa..." Will smiled and got his coat on as breakfast was over. "See you Jonathan!"

"See ya Will!"

He watched them both leave and cleaned up a little, before another familiar car came into the lot. Out stepped the girl who made his heart stop every time she looked at him. "Ready to go?" she asked. He handed her the pistol with its rounds, ready for their practice shooting session. "As ever..."

...

"The Tarresque rears back before hurtling forward after you Dustin! What do you do?" Mike asks with a tone of urgency, leaning forward in his seat.

"Aaah shit. What do you think I do? I run!" Dustin rolls the dice to make an athletics check as Will and Lucas are shaking their heads and groaning. "I got a 7, plus my own ability makes it 10... I'm screwed..." Dustin gulps as beside him the thump of Mike's hand on the table warns them of the impending doom.

"You put up a good run at first Dustin, but you never looked down once and tripped on a crack in the torn earth below. He's behind you

now, stalking up to his prey slowly, he knows you aren't going anywhere..." the evil smirk on his face makes Dustin want to punch him, and also reminds him why Mike is their DM.

"Can we save him?" Lucas asks, "I can move there and use my sword and attack with..."

From beside them El watches carefully, eyes staring at the board, sitting on the couch behind Will who's moved over a bit so she feels more included. "Your attack works, you slash at his nose and he rears back again, giving Dustin enough time to stand back up. Will?" Mike asks, turning to him.

"I'm gonna cast a transportation spell!" He rolls the dice and cheers when he gets 19. "It's a powerful spell... enough that you're taken to a spot five feet directly behind the monster. You're all prepared to fight him..."

She takes note of the placement of their characters and the notes Will had taken, trying her best to understand how the game was played. Will saw her looking over his shoulder and leaned back, speaking under his breath, "what do you think I should do El?"

She was silent for the longest moment, looking around the entire board with a calculating expression. Finally, she spoke. "Protect them."

"I can do that? Oh yeah! Good idea..." he replied, leaning forward again. "I cast a protection spell on them. Dustin, Lucas, if you guys can attack and get good rolls you'll defeat him..."

Mike looked at Will suspiciously, but the boy wasn't easily fazed and stared back just as steadily. El was another story however, her eyes directed away from him as she remembered she shouldn't have done that. She wasn't allowed to suggest moves, being an outside party of the game.

"And I rolled a 14, that's enough right?" Will asks. "Yeah it is!" Dustin replied, "I can move in with a flaming arrow..."

The game ended with them defeating the Tarresque and taking back

the jewels it swallowed by cutting them out of its gut. All the boys cheered, even Mike, and they danced around while El watched with a smile.

"You kids better be ready to come back up soon!" Mike's mom called down to them, "El needs to sleep!"

Mike sat down next to her as the boys went upstairs to change into their pyjamas. "You've watched us two nights now, think you could play next time?"

"Yes." she replied, nodding once. "Good! Here's the books you'll need. Tomorrow we'll work on making your character profile."

"Okay." She waited for him to say more, putting the three books he'd given her to her left, but his thoughts seemed to turn elsewhere as his eyes softened. "I'm still really glad you came home El. Things weren't the same when you were gone..."

"Me too... I'm glad, as well."

They smiled at each other, and just as Mike felt himself leaning towards her footsteps thundered down the staircase and he stood up quickly, blushing. "You coming Mike? Dustin wants us to trade comics before we go to bed." Lucas called, coming into view in his star wars pyjamas. The boy nodded in reply, moving back around the table and following behind his best friend. "Yeah, I'm there. Night El!"

"Night." El felt disappointed for some reason as she watched him go. There had been a feeling in her chest when his face was so close, that disappeared when he stood up again. It was odd, but then again so was everything about her.

...

"This is... messy."

Hopper said as he laid out the files one by one, on a fine morning where Will wasn't in the house and early enough that Jonathan was still sleeping. "Adoption went through thanks to the few strings I could pull. Her name is Elle Byers and she's officially on record."

She hugged that particular document, a brand new birth certificate with 'El Byers' printed across it, close to her chest, before tucking it into her own folder. "But?"

"But her face was put on the 'found children' register, and god knows where those pictures get printed..." Hopper rolled his eyes and leaned back in his seat. "And they have a social worker heading our way. We'll have to explain the situation as well as we can, especially about El not actually staying with you..."

"She's not going anywhere though. They have no legal grounds to take her... right?" Joyce asked, a little worried. "Considering what the boys said about her, and what I found in the lab? Not a chance in hell she'll go either way."

After that meeting Hopper stood up and looked around the room of his old home once, noting how much cleaner it was, how much... warmer, it'd gotten since he left.

He drove back the police-station, grateful that it was still early enough that no-one would come in as he grabbed his laundromat-cleaned suit hanging on the back of his office door.

He showered at work, thankful they had a tiny shower stall here and towelling off with the supplies they kept in case they had messy overnight stayers. There were only two cells here, but each had its own cot that he could get a decent night's rest in when he couldn't not sleep any longer.

That and the coffee maker Flo kept well-stocked had him sold on the idea that he could live at his workplace, for the time-being. The other officers didn't bother him about it at all, when he left no trace of his habitat and worked like a dog making their jobs easier... well, they let him do as he pleased.

"Morning Hop."

Powell glanced in the door as he passed, spotting the man in Flo's corner fiddling with the coffee machine. "Hey. You got a pair of pliers? There's something loose in this..."

"Nope. Got something better though."

Hopper turned and found a pallet with coffee in it sitting on his desk. Long-black, a box of glazed donuts on the side, just the way he liked to start his mornings. "You shouldn't have..."

"Who says I did?" Powell chuckled as he moved to the deputy space, leaving the conversation there since nothing more needed to be said. As by-the-book a man of the law he'd always been, he held an immense respect for the chief and even his unconventional, sometimes downright illegal methods of solving tricky cases and pursuing justice. As a most recent example the man had gone above and beyond for the Byers family and Powell respected that. The least he deserved was a damn donut...

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16. Chapter 16

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Saturday May 12th, 1984

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"Her reading comprehension seems to be at a 2nd grade level, penmanship around the same. Verbal proficiency... needs improvement. Mathematical proficiency and logical thinking, potentially very high..."

Mr Clarke sat at the small table across from Joyce that Saturday morning, laying out the two stacks of sheets filled with El's progress over the past few days.

After some deliberation between Joyce, Hopper and Karen, they'd decided that adding the schoolteacher into their small group of confidants would be best for El. If they hoped to have her adjusted enough to go to school, they'd need another outside party to be aware of her condition...

"It's a wonder they taught her anything in that lab..." he stated, looking with interest at the pictures hung up on the fridge. "She likes to draw?"

"Yes. It's something her and Will have in common..." Joyce turned to look at the fridge as well, decorated with pictures of dragons and wizards and an assortment of magical creatures that her son had taught his adopted sister to trace out in felt.

"It's nice that they get along... her and the other boys are friends too?"

"Will says that she's one of them, their fifth party member... dungeons and dragons talk..." Joyce explained and he nodded knowingly, rifling through the papers.

"As you know, our school term starts back up on Monday. I can only come here twice a week then. Is that okay?"

"It's fine, Scott. If you leave me the books I'll cover her learning during the other three weekdays... We'll get her there. Right?" Joyce asked, feeling a little unsure of herself.

Mr Clarke patted her shoulder as he made to leave. "Definitely! El's a bright girl in my opinion. Are you reading things with her already?"

"I am. She goes through the preschool-books we have like candy..." the woman admitted, standing as well. "I could never thank you enough for this Scott..."

"Not a problem! I can't wait to have another exceptional student joining the boys in my science class come next term..." He flashed her a brief smile of farewell before leaving and she closed the door behind him.

Joyce picked up the marked test papers he'd left, going through them cover by cover. The math quiz had shown she knew basic arithmetic, but most of it was just observations Scott had made while he went through the educational puzzles with her.

She'd taken to the colourful jigsaw pieces and counting beans well, and made Mr Clarke gape when she moved them around with her powers rather than shifting them with her hands.

And then there was the vocabulary paper, where she was asked to write down as many words as she knew, that filled barely two lined pages. Her penmanship was wobbly, but legible, and there were some spelling mistakes as she'd written sort of a report on herself.

Her name (written 'El Byers', underlined and in bold Joyce noted with pride), the names of the boys, her friends, and words indicating what she liked to eat and do for fun.

'Eggos, dungeons and dragons, drawings, candy and flowers...'

Each of the words were followed by a hastily drawn illustration, and she took note of all of the written things before tucking them back into the folder and getting up to look for her keys.

'I'll go to the grocery store before I head over...' she thought, forgetting about the folder as she left, hoping that El didn't mind her

being late.

...

The Wheeler house was very quiet for once, thought El as she came up to the living room to find it empty. It was a weird time of the day for her anyways. The period after breakfast, when she'd last see the Wheeler family altogether before they'd split off to do things on their own.

Usually Mike would leave for only a few minutes before joining her again. But today his mom had forced him to stay in his room and do his 'homework', whatever that was, before school started again in two days. Nancy was in her room too, doing whatever older sisters did on their own. Their father had go in to work (where, El still wasn't sure) and Karen had left a note saying she'd taken Holly and herself to the store.

Joyce was meant to come see her soon like she'd done every morning now. Even though she didn't stay long because of work, the moments she was there were cherished by the young girl. Working and money were more important than ever with the repair man bills getting higher as they continued fixing the half ripped off roof and holes in the Byers' house.

Joyce worked her two jobs and Jonathan took as many extra shifts as he could manage, even Hopper contributed, mostly by helping the repair-men on his off days. He'd expressly forbidden El from going there and using her powers, even if it would speed up the process, because she still needed to keep a low profile.

El kicked her feet a little as she played with the lazy-boy in the living room and stared out the window, thinking about her time spent with Mike and his family.

They were interesting. Nancy was nice, though Mike teased her a lot when they were together and she sometimes lost her patience at him and yelled and huffed, her annoyance didn't last long. She was always busy though, locking herself in her room to study, but she'd promised Eleven they would go shopping sometime soon.

Their father was very quiet and hardly spoke during meal times. He liked to read the newspaper and sip his coffee every morning and ignored her almost completely after their initial introduction, which she didn't mind too much.

Little Holly giggled a lot, and loved belting out the lyrics to the fraggie-rock or sesame street songs that came from the TV and playing with her toys. She sometimes made Eleven go up to her room and sat her down to play tea party and my little pony princesses.

El felt a similar feeling during those times as when she'd gone to Nancy's room on her own. Like she was viewing a life with features she'd been deprived of, but should have had. It hurt, but she'd smile through it and quietly do as Princess Holly commanded.

Mike's mom was kind and always made sure she had food on her plate during meal times, but she was so busy fussing over Holly and her other children that she forgot to talk to El a lot of the time. It also didn't help that the girl walked and talked like a shadow around the house, keeping as much as she could to the basement, trying her best to go unnoticed.

And then there was Mike, who was almost always by her side when he wasn't sleeping or doing his 'homework'. Dustin, Lucas and Will left to their own homes, usually in the evening or late afternoon.

Then she had a million questions to ask him, about his family or things in DD or a new word she'd learned, and he had his undivided attention to give her along with all the answers.

One night he'd explained that there were even more of them, because his mom and dad had brothers and sisters and parents too, and brought out the photo albums and pointed at other kids and adults, some with his dark eyes and hair, others with his freckles. It made her eyes widen in amazement. She'd never considered the concept of an extended family really. Maybe, just like Mike, she had a brother and sister too? Maybe she had a real family waiting for her? She asked him for his opinion about said possibility.

"Maybe you do have brothers and sisters out there... but you're a Byers now too..." Mike reminded her, shutting the photo album. "Will

is your real brother, remember? And Jonathan, and Will's mom is also your mom."

He could see the guilt flash across her face for a brief moment before she nodded. "You're... right. My family is here..." He didn't mean it like that really, but the thought of her running off to find her real family scared him a little. What if she left and never came back? Or even worse, if she found them and left with them and decided to forget about being a Byers, and him? The thought made his heart ache.

Instead of explaining it further, he smiled and grabbed her hand, causing them both to look away shyly as he pretended to examine the new cartoon Will and Dustin had joint drawn on his cast and Eleven played with the hem of her skirt.

In the present moment, her thoughts darkened a bit as she remembered the Wheeler's weren't really her family, not like the Byers were... not like her other family out there was.

Even though it was really nice of them to let her stay, she still didn't feel like it was home, and she wished to be with Joyce all the time who looked at her and paid attention to her as lovingly as she did her other sons. The concept of a 'mother' was something Mike had explained that El had understood completely, and no matter how much she liked being around Mike and his family she yearned for hers.

It might've been better if she tried to squeeze into Hopper's little home with them, even though she felt claustrophobic (no matter how hard she tried not to) when the living room was full with her and her adopted family and dog. She couldn't get comfortable in a small space with more than one person, which is why she liked the huge basement so much, and almost never watched TV in the living room with the Wheelers.

Eleven stood up when a car pulled up on the sidewalk outside, but her smile dropped when it wasn't Joyce that came out of the car but two other women, women that she didn't know.

Panic flashed through her eyes and she backed away from the door as

they came up the pathway. There was a short knock before one of them spoke. "Hello?" she called, "Joyce Byers?"

...

Outside, Becky Ives pulled her cardigan around her tighter, trying to ward off the winter chill. "Why did you make us come here Terry? We have Joyce Byers' address and it aint this place."

"I... Becky, I just... felt her."

Her sister spoke so slowly, words tripping over her tongue. She stood beside her sister with wide eyes, looking around slowly. Terry Ives' fists were clenched tight in her own coat, her left around a roughly cut out milk carton wall.

The flyaway hair and dishevelled appearance of both women that morning was doing them no favours to soothe the worries of the girl who cowered inside, and out of the corner of her eyes Terry saw the cloth moving across and a figure disappearing behind it.

Inside, Eleven had drawn the curtains shut and was now running downstairs to the basement to find her jacket and shoes.

Becky rolled her eyes, even as she patted her sister's shoulder in begrudging disbelief. Honestly she was still in shock, having just found out that after almost 13 long years her sister could speak. She'd moved from her bed to the bathroom and couch in silence, ate some of the meals set out for her noiselessly. But Terry had never once spoken, and almost never looked Becky in the eyes that whole time...

They were shining, her younger sister's eyes. Just this morning she'd spilt milk all over the ground when Terry cried out "Jane!" in a shocked voice, pointing to the carton she was pouring. Becky thought the voice belonged to a phantom at first, for she'd been the only person to talk in that house for the last 13 years before then.

When Terry picked up the milk carton and pointed out the side picture to Becky, the fellow woman closed her gaping jaw and moved to her side to examine it as well.

The girl in the black and white photo was pale, with sunken eyes and

short hair barely past her ears. She looked haunted herself, and bore an uncanny resemblance to their other sister. It sent a chill down Becky's spine...

"Those eyes belong to me... to my sisters. She has to be ours!" Terry felt the pull again, a tugging at her heart that forced her feet forward. She turned around the corner of the house before Becky could stop her. Then, when she was around she immediately gasped at what she saw as tears filled her eyes.

"Jane... Oh god, Jane. It's really you..."

Becky rounded the corner and found the young girl from the photo on the milk carton, backing away from the door she'd just came out of.

Her tiny wrists poked out of an ill-fitting green jacket, a pair of grey track pants and plain striped shirt covering her thin frame. The outfit looked strange on her, like she was borrowing clothes from someone else.

"Go away!" the girl warned in a harsh tone, shaking her head. But Terry didn't listen, moving forward another step. "Jane, it's me! It's your mommy. Don't you recognise me? We're here to take you home!"

Her voice turned a touch hysterical but she was oblivious to it as she took another step forward and reached her hand out to grab the girl's wrist. The tearful woman's response made her insides squirm as a memory of Papa's face flashed in her mind. She backed away from the woman, and the house, but the woman wouldn't stop approaching.

'Eleven it's me! It's Papa, don't you remember? I'm here to take you home now...'

Terry managed to reach out and place a hand on hers before the girl screamed "NOOO!" and the woman was launched back into her sister who'd just rounded the corner.

Eleven took off across the yard and road, heading towards the forest she'd once cut through with Mike and Dustin after breaking Troy's

arm and saving Mike when he tried to jump into the quarry.

The women were a shaking pile of tangled limbs and flyaway hair on the ground, but both of them glimpsed her leaving and one looked ready to pursue her. The one who'd approached her, had an especially glazed look to her eyes Eleven didn't understand.

"Jane come back!" the woman called, but El didn't listen. She needed to lead the danger away from home. She needed to get away...

"Holy shit!" Becky looked around for any sign of the girl but she'd taken off out of sight.

The wind had been knocked out of Terry and she was unsteadily wheezing in Becky's arms, but still struggling against her as the older woman led her back into the car. "Let me go Becky! She needs help! Jane!"

She couldn't even begin to process what had just happened. Becky started the car as sobs came from the wreck of a woman beside her, mixing in with the wheezing breaths she took as she clawed at her seatbelt and the locked car door.

"This was a bad idea from the start..." Becky stated, shaking her head as she tried to keep her sister's claws away from her neck and face.

"No Becky, she's... Jane's..."

"She's not Jane, Terry. She isn't! You just scared a random girl half to death!"

The sobbing increased in volume and Becky rolled her eyes, taking deep calming breaths as she pulled out onto the road and they left the cul-de-sac back the way they came.

"We're going home."

...

"El, have you eaten yet?"

Karen had just finished putting the groceries away and set out the

food for lunch before she came downstairs and looked around, surprised to find the basement empty.

She came back up and knocked on her son's room. "Michael..." she called as she opened the door, "I'm back and lunch is ready, have you seen El?"

The boy looked up from the pile of homework he'd been finishing glumly. It was the day before school started up again, since the flood, and he'd been avoiding it in favour of his friends... in favour of El.

A look of worry passed through him as he processed the question and he stood up quickly. "She's not in the basement?"

Karen shook her head no and he rushed past her, knocking on Nancy's door. "What is it?" her voice called through the door before she unlocked it to face her brother with her nowadays characteristically patient look.

"Is El in there?" Mike asked, a hint of desperation in his voice. Nancy shook her head as well, pushing her door wide to show him. "No, is she missing?"

He ran to the basement to check for himself with his mother and sister trailing behind him. "The door's unlocked from the inside. She must've left..." Mike concluded, "I'll go look for her on my bike..."

"Michael, no..." Karen tried to go back up the stairs after her son but was stopped by a tug at the wrist from Nancy. "Let him Mom, there's no harm in him looking while it's still daylight..."

"Nancy, I can't just let him ride who knows where!"

"If anyone can find Eleven it's Mike, mom. Trust him, he's 13! And I'm gonna drive around on my car and look too. You should call Ms Byers." Nancy said, before she took off back upstairs as well.

Karen sighed, looking around with a pensive expression before deciding it would be best to follow up on her daughter's suggestion.

...

Mike rode his bike all the way to the Byers' house on the other side of town as fast as he could, making the usually fifteen minute ride there in just over half the time.

The Byers dog howled from outside as he entered the gate but promptly shut up when he recognised Mike, his tail wagging as he tried to jump on the boy.

"Sorry Benny... I'll play later, okay? Will!" He yelled the last bit, knocking on the front door and leaning over with his cast arm clutching his winded torso.

It took another round of knocking before he met the familiar face of one of his best friends. "Mike..." Will stated, "You're here because of El? Your mom just called mine..."

"Yeah... you think you... can find her?"

The last part he said in a hushed tone, although still huffing, making sure the boy's mother and brother stayed unaware of his powers. He nodded, just before Joyce came into view with her jacket and keys ready.

"I was just about to head over as well, but I left her folder here... God, she probably got lost trying to walk here when I didn't come at my usual time. I'll take a drive around the whole town and see if I can spot her. You kids stay here!"

"Okay mom, we'll see if she gets here. Drive safe!" Will waved to his mom and Mike pretended to settle inside the tiny cargo-ship home before they heard her car leaving.

Immediately after, they got back on their bikes and headed out with Benny barking after them.

"Do you know where we're going?" Mike asked, as they stopped once along the road and Will closed his eyes to do his mind-reading thing.

He looked around meanwhile, wishing that he had expert tracking skills as the muddy ground below them showed various shoe prints, but he couldn't recognise any of them.

Will opened his eyes again and pushed forward, wiping at his bloody nose. "She's in the forest... I'll take you there."

"What do you mean? You're not coming?"

Will shook his head, leaving his friend befuddled. "It'd be better if just you speak to her... she's really upset."

"Why?" Mike asked, his own expression pain-filled as he pedalled a bit a bit faster to urge Will ahead. The Byers' boy shook his head again.

"I can't tell you, she should..." He'd made it a policy for himself to never reveal other people's thoughts unless they were threatening. And he rarely took the time to search through other people's minds, it made him feel bad...

They rode past the junkyard and made a bend towards the railroad tracks. Will stopped on the side after they'd walked with their bikes a certain distance and pointed into the forest. "Go straight ahead that way and you'll see her. I'll wait here..."

"Okay." Mike still puzzled at the odd way Will was putting things but ignored it for the more pressing issue of El. He followed the straightforward directions he'd been given until he found a clearing.

She sat at the base of a tree with her knees curled up against her chest in a tight little ball. Mike dropped to a crouch in front of her, noting the dried tear stains on her cheeks and still watery eyes. "El, what's wrong?"

"Nothing..." she replied, trying to smile and relax her limbs but failing. "Promise I'm fine..."

"El..." he said, trying to be firm but keeping his voice and expression soft. "Friends don't lie, and you know they can tell each other things..."

"Things that parents don't know..." El remembered, moving her hand to her face and wiping away any stray wetness with her sleeve. "Bad people came..."

"Bad people? From the lab?" Mike asked with panic, moving closer to her. She shook her head. "Bad lady said... said she was my mom... said she wanted to take me..."

She gulped a little and Mike noted her sleeve was bloody. "Did you use your powers on the bad lady?"

Eleven nodded, looking guiltily downwards. "It's okay El. She's gone now, she's just crazy. And you're adopted by Will's mom so they're not allowed to just come take you away... I'm sorry I didn't hear from my room or I would have come out too..."

"Better that you didn't... safer."

Mike frowned, grabbing El's hand and squeezing it tight. "Friends protect each other, and they fight together, so don't say it's safer not to help you."

She sniffled, looking into his face and seeing a bit of hurt as well as concern. "Okay."

He pulled her up onto her feet, feeling the heat rise on his cheeks as he looked at their intertwined fingers.

To both their disappointment she instinctively let go on gaining her balance and straightened out her wrinkled and dirty clothes and jacket. "Let's get you home and cleaned up again..."

As they walked back towards Will who sat on the tracks waiting, Mike thought about what she'd just told him. Even though he'd said the lady was just crazy, what if she really was El's mom? "El?"

"Yes." she answered, turning to him. "If you found your real mom, and she was nice, would you change your mind and go home with her instead of Will's mom?" he asked.

"Never. I wanna stay here... with you, and..."

She stopped talking there, feeling the heat rise to her cheeks. "I just wanna stay."

"Good. I... we... want you to stay too." Mike said, smiling back at her.

17. Chapter 17

...

When they arrived back at the Wheeler's house Karen immediately pulled all three children into a hug. "Oh El, where were you?!"

The girl shook her head with tearful eyes and backed away slowly, making Karen sigh. "Mom she's okay, she was just sad about something... and ran into the forest."

Mike couldn't really find the words in him to explain and eventually resorted to a simple shrug, Will remaining quiet behind him. "Well, you're safe and that's what matters..." Karen gently pushed the girl towards the bathroom, savouring that she hadn't flinched at the contact. "We'll talk about this later Michael. Will, your mom and brother are still out looking so stay here with us."

After making sure Eleven showered to get rid of the mud caking her limbs and putting her in more of Nancy's hand-me-downs, denim overalls with a long-sleeved pink shirt underneath, she sat her in the kitchen with cartoons and eggo waffles and pink lemonade. A single look at the waiting boys had them sitting down at the table as well to explain everything.

"There's a place we remembered in the forest that we found her at last year. We figured it might be somewhere she'd go, even though it's a long shot. So we thought to look there..."

The lie slipped so easily through Will's lips and Mike felt his eyebrows rise far above his fringe. The Byers boy continued, "And when we found her she told us about a crazy woman coming to the door. The woman said she was El's mom and tried to kidnap her so she ran into the forest..."

Karen went into the kitchen where El had finished her snack and placed a gentle hand on her back. "Is that true sweetie, did someone try to take you?" The girl nodded and was brought into a sweet-smelling hug. "Oh goodness, we need to tell Joyce and Hopper about this..."

...

There were three extra cars and bikes outside the house which came as a surprise to Ted Wheeler as he arrived home from work. He found the small procession of people in his living room, discussing the girl he'd had reservations about inviting into their home.

"Honey, what's happening?" he asked, coming in through the front door and dropping his suitcase by the coat rack before heading into the living room. "You're back!" Karen hugged and kissed her husband as the guests stood up. It was Chief Hopper and Joyce Byers, as well as his oldest daughter and the Byers teenager. "Daddy!" Nancy went to hug him as well. "Chief? Did something happen?" he asked with bewilderment after his daughter took a step back. "No Ted, everything's fine." Hopper went to shake the older man's hand and went for his hat. "I was just checking up on El actually, decided to come over with Joyce."

"That girl, is she in trouble?" Ted eyed the police chief and then his wife suspiciously. "Not in the way you think honey, I'll explain later..." Karen patted his chest lightly and hugged him again. "I'm glad you're back, let me get your suitcase..."

"We'd better head off..." Hopper said to Joyce and Jonathan, who nodded in agreement and stood up as well. "Let me say goodbye to El first..." Joyce smiled at Ted as she passed, heading for the basement stairs where the sound of the rowdy group of boys could be heard below. "I guess we'll leave Will here for now..." Jonathan shrugged and went out to the car. Ted didn't notice Nancy slip past him following the fellow teen outside, but Karen did. She watched them curiously as they seemed to discuss something deeply, heads bowed together.

As she followed her husband upstairs and peeked through the window to watch them, it seemed they were standing too closely, foreheads almost touching. Her oldest daughter reached out a hand to touch the boy's shoulder, him mirroring her action. Karen stopped watching, feeling she'd seen enough and reminding herself to have a talk with Nancy later.

...

"El, Will, I'm going home now!"

Said girl and boy left the friends surrounding the table and moved to the stairwell where their mother descended. Joyce smiled at them as they both shared expressions of eagerness. "Is it okay if I stay here tonight Mom?" Will asked. Joyce nodded, "I'll ask Karen if it's okay, but it's Saturday so it's fine with me. And we're so glad you're okay sweetie..."

Those words she directed to El, bringing her into a hug that smelt more like coffee and cigarettes with a hint of perfume than Karen's sweet smell. It was still very comforting though. "But please don't run off again. If you're not sure about anyone at the door, don't answer it. Call Chief Hopper or me and we'll be right there, okay?"

The girl nodded silently, enjoying the solid warmth from her adoptive mother's body that drew her in tighter. "Have a good night sweetie." Joyce ruffled Will's hair and kissed his cheek before leaving back upstairs.

"Now we've settled that the campaign's ready to start!" Mike declared, ready to completely distract El and the boys from the troubles of earlier that morning with a whole new round of their beloved D&D game. All the boys cheered and raise their new homemade props. Dustin, baseball bat turned Herculean wooden club at his side, grabbed his warrior-class character, the same as Lucas, with his camouflage headband and war paint, wrist rocket on the table next to his character sheets. Will the wise adorned a dark purple bedsheet as a warlock's cloak with a hood and held his magical wand (a cool looking stick he'd found in the forest) in his right hand, using his left to throw the dice. Mike was in plain clothes, being the DM. And then there was El, wearing the elf ears and gold circlet that Nancy gave for her costume, a white bedsheet tied around her neck. The boys agreed she looked the coolest of them all.

"Okay, El the elf, Will the wise, Lucas the strong and Dustin the awesome, you four adventurers have journeyed separately to the land of Hawkonian, and meet in the only inn that exists in this sleepy little village. You've each created some backstory to why you've arrived here, and so our true story together begins with a wanted poster for a band of brother orcs that you all chance upon seeing at the same

exact time..."

They fought a band of wolves and met hill folk that were friendly, found an ogre's cave with treasure and more monsters than just the ogre itself. Mike kept reading off the guidelines he'd written himself and threw a lot of new monsters at them, creatures varying in all sizes and strengths and natural affinities, some intelligent and some animalistic. There were puzzles to solve and chests to either smash open (with three turns skipped) or strong weapons completely broken. They were only halfway through, a solid five hours into the game, before Karen called them all up for dinner and reminded them no props or costumes at the dinner table.

"Pizza for dinner? Wow Mrs Wheeler you're the greatest!" Dustin exclaimed, grabbing a cheesy slice and putting it on his plate from one of the two boxes. "And ice-cream after that. I can't be bothered to cook for you kids and me and your dad had dinner already."

"Dad's back?" Mike ducked his head into the living room and saw the coat and shoes at the doorway, grinning widely. "He came in a couple of hours ago. Go say hi to him now Mike, before he goes to bed..." Karen suggested.

"Nancy?" Eleven asked at the same time, taking a seat and looking around for a sign of the older girl she admired greatly. Karen shook her head, "She's working on a project with Jonathan and won't be back for dinner."

Mike was about to run upstairs, but on second thought stopped at the first step and came back to the dining room. He piled his plate with pizza and left it in front of the seat next to El with a smile, reserving it just before Lucas was about to sit there. Rolling his eyes, said boy moved to the other side of the table, next to Dustin. "So he really does like the weirdo huh? He was making googly eyes at her the whole time..." Lucas half-whispered to Dustin as he glanced at the girl from his side-vision and remembered the game. Dustin nodded, "I've said it before and I'll say it again. His total obliviousness astounds me..."

"But well, at least we know she's cool already, I kinda always knew Mike would be the first of us to get a girlfriend..." Lucas further

commented, causing Dustin to snort derisively. "Come on, did you not just hear what I said? That boy is oblivious... he's not gonna do anything if he really does like her. I mean this IS Mike we're talking about here."

"I don't know how I feel about you guys talking about my sister like that..." Will had stayed quiet like usual until they brought up the topic of their friends' love lives, and said the aforementioned statement with a heated glare. Both boys rolled their eyes and huddled closer to him. On the other side of the table Eleven was busy scoffing down the pizza and gulping her glassful of soda. She'd never tried either things in her life and they'd already become one of her favourites. "Just saying, if they start sucking face at the game table we're gonna have to banish one of them from the party..." Dustin remarked, causing Will to punch his arm and exclaim "gross dude!" and Lucas to scrunch up his face in disgust at the thought of their friends kissing.

"Who are you banishing?" Mike asked, causing the boys to split up in a frenzy. He eyed each of them suspiciously when they all said "No-one!" together and looked down at their plates. Sitting down next to El, he then noticed she was eating so quickly the greasy cheese was running down one cheek and he picked up his napkin. "You've got food on your face, slow down El or you'll get a bellyache..."

The girl did as he suggested, her chewing speed decreasing as he rubbed the corner of her mouth to get rid of the grease. Dustin snickered at him but he ignored it.

...

When Nancy came home that night it was almost midnight. Her mother sat up as usual, staring at the television screen and standing when she came back in. "Come on Mom, I'm 17 now. No need to wait up for me..." she teased her mother even as she sat down next to her, taking in the woman's utter perfection. Every strand of her coiffed hair still perfectly in place, night-robe tied neatly and the house looking like she'd tidied up more than once since she left, looking as suburbia-lifestyles magazine cover-worthy as always. The woman smiled gently, just glad her daughter got home safely. "It doesn't matter how old you get sweetie, I'll always worry. Did you and

Jonathan finish your project?"

"Yeah we did mom. Actually, we finished early... and, well..."

She bit her lip and looked down at her clasped fingers. Karen brought a soothing hand down to hers, "you know you can tell me Nancy, I just want to know you're being... safe, about things."

"Safe? Mom, don't worry about safety..." Nancy giggled girlishly and brought her feet up onto the couch, looking into her mother's eyes guiltily. "I asked Jonathan if we could go somewhere to eat and he took me to Mc Donald's. I could've come home straight away and had dinner here and you could be sleeping now..."

Karen suddenly laughed, breathy and elegant as a hand fluttered to her chest. "Mc Donald's on your first date? My, that boy's a keeper..."

She gaped at her mother's joking attitude, standing up and sitting down successively on the sofa as her mother watched with a patient look. "Seriously Mom, you're not mad?"

It felt like aliens had come and taken the real Karen Wheeler away, to be replaced by an android version (not too far off from her real mom really). This one looked... very much human, though. A tear drop threatened to form in the corner of her eye but she dabbed it away and stood up. "I'm not mad, but I am a little tired. Thank you for telling me Nancy, I'll leave you alone now..."

Nancy watched her mom head for the staircase quietly, slippers making no noise against the carpet. "Before I forget though, would you mind sleeping in the basement tonight? I set up the couch for you and the furnace is going."

"What? I mean I don't mind, but why? Did El ask for me?" Nancy furrowed her eyebrows when her mother shook her head. "No, the boys and El are having a sleepover down there, I thought I'd give them a last treat before school started, and to distract them from what happened to her this morning. It's a one-time thing. Watch them, please?"

Never in her life did Nancy ever think there would be a time when

her mom would be okay with boy-girl sleepovers, even when it came to the kids that would be the last on earth to do anything like... that. She felt herself nodding even as she'd reeled back in shock, noting the almost... smirk, that her mother's face wore as she turned around and headed upstairs. No freaking way that was really Karen Wheeler, what the hell was happening?

Nancy waited for the soft sound of a bedroom door shutting for the final time before she made her way up to her own room. She found her own baby blue pyjamas and put them on, before wrapping herself in her favourite comforter and making her way down the two flights of stairs to the basement.

It was warm at least, and the couch piled with cushions and spare blankets looked so inviting, folded down in just the way her mother knew she liked it. The boys and El waved to her from the ground, quietly continuing the game with costumes exchanged for pyjamas. Their sleeping bags and pillows were arranged almost perfectly around the board that had been moved to the ground, like a five pointed star. "Don't mind me guys, just watching..."

"Mom said we could only sleep in the same room as El if you were there as well." Mike explained, shrugging his shoulders at her while glancing at the girl concentrating beside her. "I know. So you wanna start with the bribes to make me stay down here with El permanently so you can too, now? Or..."

Dustin and Lucas heard that too and started cracking up while Mike glared at his sister and Will was glaring at both the Wheeler kids. El was still a little confused, looking between them all with heat in her cheeks that she didn't understand and her usual 'what the hell is happening' stare. "Too bad I can't make the same deal with Will's mom for Jonathan huh? Sis..."

Nancy smirked and shoved his brother's shoulder playfully. "You're not gonna pound on Jonathan for messing with your sister, but you think he'll extend the same courtesy?" A pointed look at Eleven, and the still glaring Will, and the surprisingly strong bond that the three Byers kids had formed in the few days since they'd been declared siblings forced Mike in a corner. He gulped audibly, frowning at his sat-up sister and shoving her shoulder too. "I'm not bribing you for

anything. Stop being gross..."

Nancy laughed again and lay back in her bed, glad to finally have gotten one up on her twerp of a little brother. She had to admit that puppy-romance thing between her brother and El was cute and innocent (at the moment), and she knew none of the things she was implying were anything near what Mike was capable of. She watched the game continue for the next half hour, amidst muffled gasps and hitting Dustin's shoulder when he went above their lowered decibel volume allowance with his booming voice. As they finished off the rest of the campaign and quietly cheered when they finally took back the Elvin realm El the elf, who turned out to be a long-lost princess, had originally hailed from. When they celebrated with a long feast and snacked on the leftover pizza and soda they'd brought down and brushed their teeth before settling down to sleep.

Nancy smiled through half-closed lids as the lights dimmed and she saw Will and El, the first to doze off, being tucked to sleep by the boys, their D&D folders taken out from under their heads and blankets brought up over their shoulders carefully. "Night El." Mike whispered before moving heading for his own bed, as did Lucas and Dustin after Will mumbled a sleepy goodnight to them. Nancy thought it was the cutest display of affection she'd ever seen from him in her life.

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18. Chapter 18

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Saturday May 19th, 1984

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The forest was quiet. Trees on all sides of her, sparse and wide-spread, leaves long dead and covering the ground to form the dry peat layer that crunched beneath her feet. She walked lightly and tried to avoid the mud that might dirty her new pink and white sneakers, a gift from Joyce.

She needed to come here to think. Before, when she'd thought herself a monster after hurling Lucas through the air and ran from Mike and Dustin, the forest had provided her with shelter. It helped her escape from the bad men numerous times... it was always her special place to escape to when things were too hectic.

El recalled the moment, three days ago, when Joyce and Hopper had sat her down in the Wheeler's kitchen and explained what they'd kept from her. The news of Terry Ives and her sister Becky came as a shock to the girl, and she now felt a mixture of anger and anxiety, but without anyone to direct it towards.

The morning sun rose higher in the air and she knew it would be time to turn back soon, before the Wheeler's woke up and worried. 'But first I need to decide... should I go see her again?'

She bit her lip as she paced around a small clearing. 'If I go... won't Joyce be sad? Won't Mike? I don't want to leave, and stop being a Byers or Mike's more than a friend...'

She stopped pacing at a random tree and began kicking it to release some of the tension and nerves that filled her stomach. A voice in the back of her mind was telling her that she needed to talk to Joyce and Mike directly.

"What the hell did that tree ever do to you?!"

El jumped back and looked around wildly, freezing in place when she spotted the source of the voice right behind her. "Who... who are you?" she asked, eyes wide as she turned to face the girl who looked about her age with a defensive stance.

She was taller than El, maybe taller than Mike even. Tanned skin ruddy, as if she spent a lot of time outdoors, strong-looking arms bare with grey sleeveless vest and fingerless black gloves.

She flipped the baseball cap covering her messy blonde plaits backwards and moved closer to El, who bowed her head low and prepared to attack. The girl stopped approaching, blue eyes flashing and expression hardening as she shook her head. "Relax, won't ya? If you're looking for a fight you aint gonna beat me, so don't even try squirt..."

The statement followed by her half sneer was all it took before El lifted her hand and shoved the air. The girl her power was directed towards was shoved backwards, right into a low hanging tree branch that her limbs became entangled in.

"OW! Hey!" The girl tucked into a roll just in time and got up as quickly as she was shoved down. "What the hell did... did you just do?"

She disappeared from sight, but breaking twigs and crunching footsteps indicated her presence still nearby. The girl who was pushed down broke into a sprint towards the noise. "Hey freak! Get back here and tell me what you did!"

She was fast and agile, catching up easily to the girl ahead who ran like a newborn deer, all gangly limbs. When she reached the girl she tackled her to the ground. "You thought you could mess with me huh? I'll show you..."

The teasing smirk as she pushed Eleven's hands back and leant over her made the girl even angrier. "I can... I can hurt you." El stated through short puffs of breath.

"I bet you can..." The mysterious girl snarled back, even though her eyes were soft as well as angry for some reason. "So I'm gonna let you

go. But don't take off just yet or I'll use my fists. I've got something to say..."

Eleven felt the world spinning round and little spots of light in her vision. Being tackled to the ground had really hurt her. The blonde bully-like girl stood up, but she couldn't get up herself. "What... what is it?" El asked, looking up at her angrily.

At first she stood there silently, crossing her arms as she assessed Eleven's appearance. Then, after what felt like a full minute she stuck out her gloved hand. "The name's Max, pipsqueak..."

Eleven stared at the hand with suspicion. Eventually, she grabbed it and felt herself being easily pulled upwards onto her feet. "El."

"Just El? Short for Ellen? Eleanor?" El shook her head at both names and Max sighed. "Just El." she declared, still a little dizzy.

"Weird. It suits you." Max frowned when she didn't answer, merely ignored her to brush off the dirt from her shorts and pull up her long socks. "Whatever then, my name's short for Maxine... you live close?"

The girl nodded, standing in place but glancing to the side every so often as if she wanted nothing more than to bolt. "I just moved here with my little sister... her name's Carrie."

El nodded again, wondering where this weird Max girl was going with her conversation. "You're a freak..." she stated bluntly, assessing her correctly with her arms crossed.

El flinched at the harsh tone and tried to steady herself from the push she'd felt with Max's sudden declaration, but it was hard. "You've got powers and something about you... it ain't normal. I can tell, I've been around freaks my whole life."

Max glared off into the distance, leaning against a tree. "My mom's a total freak too, thinks the world is a big scary monster out to get her. And don't even get me started on my sister..."

"What do you want?" El asked, moving to lean against the same tree a safe distance away from Max. She felt well enough to run now, but this girl would probably catch her. She could break her leg, but there

would be repercussions if/when this girl told her mother about it.

Max shrugged, expression softening when the girl flinched as she looked over again. "Why are you out here kicking trees?"

El shrugged as well, and they looked down at the ground. "I came to think..." she eventually replied.

"Think about what?" Max asked.

"My mom."

El felt strange about telling this girl things. When she'd first escaped the lab she'd been almost mute, untrusting of everyone and unwilling to share her life story.

But she'd just opened up to this Max girl in a matter of minutes. Even compared to the day it took to warm up to Mike, El was in a state of unease... but at the same time, content.

Perhaps she'd have been reassured to know that Max shared the exact same sentiments as her. Said girl raised an eyebrow, but didn't ask for further detail. "I came to think too, about my sister."

Her voice drifted off and the guarded look came down for a second, piquing El's interest.

"Where did your powers come from?" Max asked before El could inquire further. "Were you born with them?"

El nodded, "I'm telekinetic. It means I move things... with my mind." All that and more actually. Max's eyes widened and lips parted. "Show me!" she demanded, pointing at a soda can someone littered. "Move that!"

El rolled her eyes and focused on the can, easily lifting and sending it flinging off into the distance. She then did the same with the giant boulder it had sat upon as well, moving it a few meters to the side before letting it drop with a mighty thud.

"Whoa..." Max gaped in astonishment at the other girl. 'She's just like Carrie...'

"Don't tell anyone." El warned, turning to her with a single drop of blood coming from her nose that was quickly wiped away. "I won't, I swear!" Max raised a hand in promise. She then glanced at her watch and saw the time.

"Oh shit! My mom'll be up now. I gotta go... but yeah, I'll keep all this secret. Don't tell anyone about me or what I said either, got it?"

"Friends keep secrets..." El stated, bringing her hand up too. "Friends?"

"Friends."

They shook on it, and that was how the unlikely friendship between the tall blonde tomboy and the short-haired telekinetic formed.

Mike was just about to descend the basement stairs when he heard the door slam down there. His footsteps quickened, long legs taking every other step as he reached the bottom of the stairwell and looked around.

Eleven faced him with a wide-eyed expression, a streak of dried blood on her upper lip and her clothes smeared with dirt. "What happened El, are you okay?!" He asked, rushing to her side and grabbing her elbows in worry.

"Nothing... I fell... in the forest."

Her voice and expression seemed guilty, making Mike frown a little. "El, are you... lying?"

Eleven's shoulders slumped and she pulled away from him, moving towards the couch. He followed her, still waiting for an answer as they sat down together. "Mike?" she asked quietly.

"Yes El?" he answered with his usual patience, letting her continue in her own time. "If I wanted to... see my real mother... would you be mad?"

The conversation topic wasn't what he expected. His eyebrows rose in surprise as he said back, "umm... I wouldn't be mad. Are you going to see her?"

"Hopper asked if I wanted... said the woman from before... my real mom... but Joyce, and you..." she explained, recalling last weekend's incident.

"Were you worried we'd be mad?" He asked with a disbelieving smile, grabbing her hand. "Don't you remember what we said in the forest last week El?"

She nodded in reply, liking the squeeze he gave and returning it with a softer squeeze of his own. "I'm not mad about you wanting to see your real mom. And you're still a Byers, you're still gonna live with the Byers right?"

"Yes, definitely. Promise." El stated, smiling through her teary eyes as relief filled the small part of her anxiety that had to do with this decision and all its implications. "Good. Tell Joyce and Hopper as well, and don't worry, they'll understand." Mike reassured her.

Afterwards, she went to the bathroom and cleaned herself off. In the bathroom mirror she practiced her not guilty faces, glad that the topic of her birth mother had distracted Mike enough to not ask about why she looked like she might have been knocked down in the forest.

She'd forgotten that she promised to keep Max's secret from everyone, including Mike. Although he tended to trust her almost blindly, even he'd probably see through her attempts to deceive. Practice would be necessary should Will ever come around, or Lucas, who had the ability to read her and everyone around him, without the mind powers.

For now though, there was only the Wheelers to explain to, and they'd thankfully be distracted by the morning activities and Mrs Wheeler's delicious breakfast of eggs and eggos and syrup (an interesting combination Mike was teaching her to like).

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19. Chapter 19

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Friday May 25th, 1984

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A late morning on a Friday in May would find every other 7th grade kid in Hawkins, Indiana at middle school, languishing in Pre-Algebra and Language Arts and Sciences and State Capitals.

Only one could be found outside of class, sitting in the back of the police chief's truck with her adoptive mother glancing in the back seat every so often to check her face for signs of discomfort or nervousness about where they were going.

Hopper sat in the driver's seat, cigarette extended far out the window and smoke trailing from his nostrils as he drove, his eyes meeting hers sometimes in the rear-view mirror when she cared to look away from the passing scenery.

The drive surprisingly wasn't that far, and by noon they reached the old house with its dinghy yard of too long brown grass that looked to be in shambles. There was a new hole in the front window since Joyce and Hopper had last been, patched up with scotch tape and cardboard.

Even from a distance they could see the screen door had been knocked off its hinges and hung loose against the house wall.

"Well, you ready El?" Hopper asked, putting out the burnt down butt with his shoe and standing up to stretch outside the vehicle. El nodded and grabbed Joyce's hand as said woman opened the door and helped her clamber out of the vehicle.

"Are you sure you're okay with his honey?" she asked worriedly as they stood in front of the house together. "Yes" she replied, straightening her shoulders and giving Joyce half a smile, even as her lips trembled with nervousness.

"I want you to tell me if this gets to be too much for you..." El nods again at Joyce's request as they reach the front door and knock, with Hopper right behind them.

It swings open and they meet the dark blonde headed woman from earlier. She looks at them all, then down at El, and her mouth turns up in a smile both apologetic and warm. "Hi again... Elle. And Joyce and Jim. Please come in..."

As Becky Ives turned back to the living room she went over the things Joyce had told her over the phone in her head. Her name was now Elle Byers, short for Eleven (though the adoption agency didn't know that).

They weren't exactly sure of her age but they'd written down that she'd be turning 13 this year on November 7th (apparently suggested by some friends she had). She was a sensitive child, prone to running off and jumpy around loud and new things.

El rounded the corner of the hallway and found the living room, where her mother stood waiting. From a distance, El thought this woman looked very much like Mrs Wheeler, only with her hair braided behind her back and wearing a loose white dress, with a few more lines and a more haunted look to her face.

The woman smiled at her, wide and gentle and it worked in easing the tension from the young girl's body as she stared in wonder, still clutching Joyce's hand tightly. "Hello..." she said, coming forward and crouching slowly in front of El so they were at El. "My name is Terry Ives. You must be Eleven?"

El nodded, releasing her firm hold on Joyce and bringing her hand out to shake Terry's. "Call me El."

"El... that's a lovely nickname. Who came up with that?" she asked, shaking the clammy smaller hand with her own cool but somewhat rough one. "My friend Mike... he found me, after... after..."

Eleven looked down at the floor, hand still shaking but wanting to stop. Terry simply nodded in understanding and stood back up. "That's okay El, you don't have to say..."

"Why don't you all have a seat? Kettle's almost boiled." Becky said, turning to the kitchen where the tell-tale squeal was almost ready to sound. The three sat down opposite Terry on her single couch, not so uncomfortable in the silence that followed while they heard the rustling of Becky in the kitchen.

It was only a few minutes before she came out with a tray laden with sandwiches and cake, and a pot and jug of tea, hot and sweet-iced respectively. The prospect of food helped ease the tension for everyone, as they enjoyed the meal together. And with Becky there she and Terry began to tell their stories, the ones El had been most eager to hear about.

"We have two other sister's, one older and one younger..." Terry began after handing El her glass of iced tea and pouring her own.

"Had..." Becky reminded her sister gently with a hand to her shoulder. "Jane passed away three years ago, brain cancer..."

Hopper and Joyce looked at each other and then at El, who nodded with a gulp. "She was meant to be your god-mother..." Terry added with a sad looking smile, "Would you like to see pictures of her?"

"Yes, please." Becky got up for Terry and left the room again. Terry took the following moments of silence to study her daughter's face for a moment. "You won't believe how alike you two look... I was going to name you after her as well..."

But Terry decided to banish the thought of imposing anything that might make Eleven uncomfortable in such a way. She was El Byers now, born to her but not really hers.

"Here they are..." Becky returned with a small shoebox and left it in front of Terry. "Have at it sis."

El was handed photos to look at, each one taking her breath away a little more than the last. From young toddlers with bright golden heads and hazel eyes, an unfamiliar couple behind them that she supposed were her grandparents (deceased apparently), to adolescents with distinct looking traits.

"Me, Becky, Lucy and Jane..." Terry pointed them out for her. "Lucy's off somewhere in Europe helping to fight the commies... we haven't seen her since college, she sends letters though."

Lucy, her Aunt Lucy, dyed her hair black and wore dark clothes and a permanent grimace in almost all the pictures they had of her. She looked sad or angry, but sometimes happy with her sisters and no-one else in the photos.

Aunt Becky wasn't far off with the grimace, though her clothes remained plain and hair untouched. There were pictures of her with braces, of her looking like she was pulled into the shot by Terry or Jane. Never by Lucy, who'd wanted to be there even less than her...

Terry went through phases growing up. Dark hair and nails and heavy makeup in one picture, then bare-faced and shoeless, wearing bohemian dresses in the next. Her streaked blonde hair and tan skin made her look like the outdoorsy type, very different to the pale, more washed out version of her today.

And then there was Aunt Jane. Sweet-smiling with bright chestnut hair and big hazel eyes and always wearing flowery dresses. She looked like someone El really would have liked to know, as pretty as she thought Nancy was.

The last few pictures of her in her cancer stages almost brought El to tears. As the woman grew thinner, her hair fell out and features sharpened... she looked exactly like what El used to see in the mirror, and what she still saw sometimes. That haunted look of someone who'd seen too much too early...

"Take these with you." Terry said, handing the photos she'd noticed El clutching onto the tightest. "We have copies, and I'd like you to have something to remember us with..."

"That's very nice of you Terry. What are you two going to do when we leave?" Joyce asked, having been almost as silent as Hopper the whole time. "I have work in an hour, and Terry..." Becky looked unsure towards her sister, who shrugged. "I'll find something to do..."

"Can I visit them... again?" El asked with her eyebrows furrowed,

looking to Joyce and Hopper for permission. "Of course, if you'd like." Joyce squeezed her hand encouragingly. "We can come back next week even..."

"That'd be lovely." Terry and Becky waved them and Hop, who simply tipped his hat to them, off. As Terry sighed happily and returned to her chair, talking of plans to one day move to Hawkins and possibly be a more permanent presence in El's life, Becky took a cigarette to the window.

This girl was her niece. While she'd been unsure of the fact at first there had been irrefutable proof in the DNA test Hopper had driven over just yesterday. Not only that, but the girl bore a resemblance to them so uncanny it was undeniable that she had Ives blood running through her veins. They needed to do right by her...

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Saturday May 26th, 1984

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The very next day Nancy took her shopping like she'd promised. Sick of seeing ill-fitting hand me downs and boy's clothes on El, Nancy felt the need to give her a hand fashion-wise, especially after noticing the girl's slowly changing body.

El trailed after Nancy through the busy shopping centre, inconspicuous in the sea of people with their own preoccupations. It was the first time she'd ever been without Joyce or the boys, but distinctly not on her own.

She passed stores that sold all kinds of things, toys like she'd seen in Mike's and Holly's rooms, food she'd never tried before, clothes for men and woman and babies and kids... Everything was here. It was so much to take in and all so brightly coloured.

El followed the older girl closely, clinging to her hand, flinching back whenever someone drew too close. Nancy was vigilant to that, always offering sweet smiles of reassurance, leading them away from the crowded areas and sticking to the sides.

Nancy led them into a clothes store that wasn't as bright and smelling like flowers as the ones they'd passed. The racks were overflowing with an odd assortment of clothes, dresses and pants and shirts folded up in a large corner.

"We're kind of on a budget since you basically need a whole wardrobe, El. This is called a goodwill store. People give in clothes they don't want anymore and they're sold for a cheaper price..."

"Like your clothes, Nancy?" El asked, following behind her as she picked up shirts. "Yeah, like my clothes..."

The store attendant appeared, an elderly lady who smiled at the two girls. "Need some help?"

"Yes please, where's the preteen girl's section?" Nancy asked, then allowed the woman to lead them further into the back.

Nancy stood her in front of the mirror and brought piles of clothes next to her. "It's your body and your choice what to wear." El nodded and stood in the changing room as instructed, grabbing the articles of clothing Nancy handed her.

She liked two t-shirts the most, one light pink with a picture of a white bunny and the other bright orange with a little blue butterfly. They were probably a little childish, but having never gotten to wear stuff like this before, El was enchanted.

She got two pairs of jeans, one dark blue and the other light blue that she had to try on in the changing rooms, and two pairs of sweatpants for at home like Mike's. Nancy brought her plain white long shirts and dark shorts, and a light purple winter coat with a hood. Lastly she found the section of pastel coloured dresses and delighted in picking out three, yellow and sleeveless, pink and elbow-length and pale blue and full.

In another store Nancy brought her apparently necessary items of clothing called 'bras' alongside panties. "I'll explain later why you need these..." she whispered, holding the garment that looked like a tiny white singlet out to her.

Lastly she got socks, a new pair of white tennis shoes that didn't pinch her feet or hang loose around her toes, and some strange toiletries. They headed for the exit and El felt exhausted after having to stand around so long and pick everything out.

Just as they were about to leave, El spotted a dress in a store they hadn't been in. She stopped for a second, pulling Nancy back with her.

"Pretty."

The younger girl pointed to a dress on display, white with elbow length lace sleeves and a sparkly skirt skimming the knees. It reminded her of a princess she'd seen in a picture book once, one that a nice nurse had showed her in the lab.

"That is pretty... Oh, what the heck!"

Nancy pulled her in to try on the dress and led her to the changing rooms in the back, making sure to keep the door open a crack like before. El came out, feeling a little self-conscious as Nancy gasped. "Pretty?" she asked, looking in the mirror at herself unsurely.

"It's pretty El! It really is. But let me tell you something now, as long as you think it looks good nobody else's opinion matters, okay?" El nodded, smiling as she put her normal clothes back on and Nancy took the dress to pay for it.

They came to the Wheeler's home and the boys walked out to meet them at the car. "Finally, you took forever!" Mike complained after greeting a tired El with a wide grin. "Need some help with those?" asked Lucas, opening the back door. "Oh, yeah sure-

Nancy's reply was cut short by the trail of shopping bags moving themselves out of the car door, making her eyes bulge and mouth gawk. Lucas's jaw dropped to the ground as well. "What the..."

Will laughed at his friends and Nancy's faces before pointing at El. Said girl had her face down, eye focused intensely on the bags floating into the house. "Did you forget you're living with Professor X?"

"Looks like you girls bought a lot today..." Dustin teased El, as said girl slumped next to Mike on the three seater in the living room once the bags settled themselves in Nancy's room, to be sorted later.

"Tired." she mumbled in reply, rubbing her face. "Not too tired for D&D right? We're playing after lunch." Mike told her, patting her back gently. "I'll play too." she mumbled, leaning on his shoulder.

"Awww" Dustin said mockingly, making the boy blush while the others snickered.

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20. Chapter 20

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Sunday May 27th, 1984

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She found herself deep in the forest once again, walking along in her new pink dress that she'd chosen yesterday and an old navy cardigan of Nancy's.

There was purpose in every stride forward, for that Sunday morning she was going to she'd made last week during the time they'd agreed on. El hoped she wasn't too late to meet Max.

"Well, you took your damn time..." Max stated, leaning on the same tree as before. Today she wore ripped jeans and a baggy red shirt, her baseball cap was still on backwards over her blonde plaits. "I've been here for an hour already, so I'll have to leave soon..."

"Sorry." El ducked her head guiltily, following behind Max who set out for the train-tracks. Neither of them had any idea of what the plan for their time spent together was. After playing DD last night the boys kept her up until almost midnight before leaving to Mike's room, and that made her oversleep. She explained so to Max in as few words as possible and was promptly forgiven.

El had returned out of curiosity, and a promise made between friends. She was curious to know what girls her age were like, although she suspected Max wasn't typical of girls their age. She wore boy's clothes and swore a lot like Dustin and Lucas. El wanted to know why Max had returned, but thought it mightn't be a good idea to ask the girl yet, so early in their friendship.

The two walked along, kicking the ground as they went. El was silent but Max was chatty, talking about moving to Indiana from Chicago, living in the big city with her mom and sister. She was the same age as El, even if she looked older.

Eleven told some of her story in exchange, about being in a lab until last year when she escaped and being adopted by the Byers. Max listened in mute amazement.

"Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Will..." El named off the group of boys who were friends. "Will is my brother. They're all nice..."

"I've seen them at school. They all sit at the front and don't talk to anyone else..." Max replied, refraining from calling them geeks like she wanted. "When do you go to school?"

"September, new semester. Joyce says..." El replied. Max half-smiled at that. "All the other girls at that school are lame, you and me'd be the coolest there..."

"They're cool too" El insisted. "Is it okay if I tell them about you? They'll be your friends." she asked, stopping Max in her tracks. She wasn't so sure it was a good idea, maybe because she worried they'd pull her out of the low profile she'd been maintaining for the last three weeks.

Thankfully Mr Clarke hadn't pushed her into introducing herself in homeroom, and the curious stares couldn't reach the back corner of class where she sat.

"I... suppose. No reason not to, right?" She tried to shrug it off nonchalantly, but El saw the worry.

Talk moved to Max's family, as El had asked about her sister Carrie, who apparently didn't go to school like Max since she was 'special'.

"Carrie was born a year after me and we stayed in Chicago. My dad wanted to move to Maine after her, but then he died. Having two screaming babies and a dead husband is probably what made my mom so bonkers. She'll be turning 12 soon. Wish we could have a party or something..."

"Why no party?" El had learned from Mike that on birthdays you had to have a party with cake, candles and friends. On that day everyone was supposed to do whatever you wanted...

"My mom says the only friend we need is God and cake is for sinners.

No friends. No cake. No party." Max rolled her eyes, even with the hurt expression on her face. El resolved to ask Mike later who 'God' and 'sinners' were.

El didn't know what else to say and so they reached the junkyard in silence. Max pointed at one of the houses across the street. "That's my house..."

It was normal looking enough, with a little attic window high up and small porch leading to the front door. "Next week same time?"

El nodded in reply, watching Max leave and head around the side of the house, probably to use the backdoor like she did.

She returned home and found Mike waiting downstairs again. "I thought you might sneak out again..." he said with his arms crossed, looking in that moment very similar to his overprotective mother.

"And then I remembered last week you had cuts on your elbows and your dress was all muddy. Is there something you're not telling me?"

Eleven sighed. "I made a new friend. Her name's Max..."

...

They drove outside the limits of Hawkins and kissed their hometown goodbye for the time being. Nancy leaned back in her seat, taking in the passing scenery while Jonathan drove beside her. There was no plan in mind for where they were going, but that morning Jonathan was feeling more suffocated than usual in their tiny temporary home. With both Will and his mom gone and no work that day who else would he call to hang out with?

"So where exactly are you taking me?" Nancy asked. Jonathan shook his head, "it's just a place I found, I thought you'd wanna see it..."

She left it at that with a half smirk, propping an arm up on the open window that whipped her hair back. "Have you thought about college yet?"

He shook his head, clenching the steering wheel a little tighter. "Not yet, I know I want to leave Hawkins... What about you?"

"Same deal. I mean, about leaving Hawkins. I want to live in a city, maybe New York..." she pondered. He was surprised to hear that. "Actually, me too. It was kind of always my dream to live in New York and get my own studio apartment."

Nancy looked to him with amusement, noting the disbelief in his eyes. "Let me know if you ever need a room-mate, it'd be nice to know at least one person there..."

They grinned at each other, slowing to a stop near the side of the road. Nancy got out and gasped, nearing the edge of the cliff-side that overlooked a small canyon. The noon sun hung right over them and the sky was cloudless.

Before Nancy knew what was happening several flashes sounded off behind her. "Hey!" she cried, reaching out to Jonathan who jumped away with a playful grin. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself..."

"Did you just bring me out here to take photos of me?" she asked, rolling her eyes and looking back at the view. "No, I really just wanted to share this with you." His smile turned apologetic and he dropped his camera back in the car. After jumping up to sit on the hood he patted the spot next to him, which she took.

"It's beautiful Jonathan. Thanks for bringing me..." She said, letting her hands touch his as she leaned back on them like he did.

"No problem. Nancy, were you serious about wanting to go to New York?" he asked, looking to her face. She nodded, "Absolutely. Well, NYU was my choice... but Mom and Dad are pressuring me to apply for Harrison, so I'll be close..."

"But is that what you want?" he asked, and she shook her head with a sigh. "If they're paying for my tuition I'll have to."

"So, scholarship then?"

"I'll try for one. Same for you?" he nodded, "if you don't mind actually, I might use one of those photos of you for my portfolio."

"Go for it. If it helps you get what you want..."

"Thanks, and if you ever need anything from me..." Jonathan offered. Nancy stayed silent for a moment, face contemplating. He watched her for a few moments before placing a hand on her shoulder. "Something wrong?"

She shook her head. "It's just..."

And she leaned forward, grabbing the back of his neck and drawing him closer. He wasn't sure what to do, letting his hands drop to his sides before settling into the kiss and bringing them up again to stroke her neck. She only released him when the need for air became too much.

Pupils dilated and breathing hot against each-other's faces, Jonathan stroked her cheeks and leaned his forehead against hers. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he asked, unsure himself of what they were doing. "Yes. Now kiss me."

He happily obliged, hands wrapping around her waist as she dragged him down again.

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Monday 28th May, 1984

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"There she is!"

Lucas pointed her out to Mike, Dustin and Will as they stopped on their bikes after riding that morning to school together. From the bike stands they could see her across the road. The bright blonde hair and tall body of the girl known only as 'Max' could be seen, riding along the pavement on a skateboard drawing closer.

"Hey, she's in English and Math with us!" Dustin realised, hitting Mike's arm. "Is she?"

Never really one to look around the class Mike shrugged as Dustin rolled his eyes. "Uuuuh yeah dude! She took Brian Nelson's seat and that's why he has to sit behind me, which freaking sucks by the way..."

"So what? Do we say hi now or..." Will looked back at the other three boys who seemed unsure, most of all Lucas. "Maybe she doesn't want friends? I mean she's been here like a month and hasn't even tried talking to anyone..." Lucas suggested, still sceptical about this girl.

"Come on Lucas, everyone wants friends!" Mike argued. "Well if you wanna be her friend then you do all the talking!" Lucas declared. Dustin nodded in agreement, gulping when said girl passed with her rolled up bomber jacket showing her strong looking arms and blue eyes shot a glare at him before she entered the school building. "Dude, she looks scary. So yeah, what Lucas said..."

Mike rolled his eyes and they locked up their bikes before entering the building as well. "Well if it isn't the freak show!" a familiar voice called out, making them all groan and turn around as they passed an open classroom. Out stepped Troy Peyton and his small gang of three fellow football players.

Since joining the team that year he'd gained both muscle and height. And though avoiding him was actually easier nowadays with him at training during most lunchtimes and after school, the mornings were still a hard point for them.

"What is it Troy?" Mike asked impatiently, looking back for the bright blonde head that disappeared in the crowd of students. "Watcha looking for frogface? Your imaginary girlfriend?" Troy jeered making his cronies guffaw.

"Boyfriends you mean? They're all right there..." They laughed louder at one of the other boy's, Caden Jones's, add-on. The insults stung a little, especially when Mike thought of El, but he glared silently until they finished their joking around.

It worked, or more like they were saved by the bell. The jocks groaned and shoved Mike and his friends against the lockers before leaving them in the emptying hallway. "Douchebags..." Lucas cursed under his breath, "one day I'll sock him before he even sees it coming."

"I can't wait til El gets here and makes him piss himself again. You should've been there Will, it was the best moment of my life!" Dustin

exclaimed as they hurriedly pulled books out of their lockers.

"Oh man I wish I could've..." Will replied. They rushed into homeroom late, but since it was Mr Clarke he excused them and continued taking attendance. The class largely ignored the group and they returned the favour, everyone chatting amicably in their respective cliques.

They spotted Max in the back of the class room, feet propped up in the chair ahead of her. Instead of taking the front seats like usual Mike quietly led the three other boys to a crop of empty middle seats right in front of her.

"Can we sit there?" Mike asked, pointing to the seat she had her feet on. She shrugged, looking at them all as if she'd been expecting them, which she had. "I dunno, can you? It's a bit small for all of you..."

'Ugh, a wise-guy, wise-girl... whatever.' Lucas thought, dropping next to Mike who took the seat in front of Max and Will and Dustin sat in front of them. Max chuckled a bit but kept her expression stern, looking round the room and making sure nobody cared to eavesdrop.

"So, Max..." Mike turned around and tried to start a conversation, but his limited knowledge of talking with girls immediately had him flustered. "Uuuuhhh..."

"Jeez, you don't have to get all sappy on me. I'm not El." This time the frown changed into a smirk and she full-blown laughed while Dustin, Lucas and even Will snickered with his head ducked in his drawing book.

"So you do know El!" Mike replied, ignoring the heat in his face at her comments. She leaned back and folded her arms, surveying him as well as the others. Dustin and Lucas were pointedly grinning and staring at her and Mike like spectators of a comedy skit. Will was slightly preoccupied, but she knew he was also observing.

"Yup. She told you how we met?"

Mike nodded, longish hair flicks bobbing up and down. "Last week in the forest, yeah."

"And she told you she showed me her powers?"

"What! She already showed YOU?!" Dustin pointed at her with his overly loud voice and Mike punched him to be quiet, even if his reaction felt similar. Lucas was silent still, frown deepening, and they had Will's full attention now.

"Yeah, long story short I made her use them to fight me..." she shrugged nonchalantly at this as said boys all showed signs of shock.

"Well no wonder she showed you, she had to defend herself..." Lucas finally decided to speak, elbow propped on his chair. "She did the same to me when I tried to rat her out to Mike's mom."

Max raised an eyebrow in surprise. "Sounds like another long story..."

"You wouldn't believe." Lucas rolled his eyes and turned to Dustin and Will. "Mike made us come over here to ask if you wanted to be friends. I think he's just making sure you aren't a threat to El... you know why, obviously."

Mike punched Lucas in the shoulder too as said boy shared a laugh with her and Dustin and Will joined in. 'I didn't believe her when she said they were cool...' Max thought, watching Lucas and Dustin tease Mike while Will silently drew. "You're her brother right?" she asked the smaller boy, who looked up in surprise. He simply nodded.

"Hmm. She didn't talk much about you. That's a cool drawing, you're good."

"Thanks. It's our DD characters..." he didn't know if she knew what he was talking about, but her eyes flashed in recognition. "I'm guessing you're the wizard huh?"

"How'd you... how'd you know?" he asked in disbelief, looking for the obvious similarities between him and the decrepit old man with a cloak and beard. "I think it's pretty obvious." she said with a serious expression, causing his eyes to widen further. Under his breath Dustin whispered "superpowers..."

She was having too much fun to reveal that El had told her about the game they played in the basement and what their characters were.

For now it was funnier to watch the boys discuss the possibility of another telekinetic girl in their group as she pointed them all out on the paper. How close they were to the truth though...

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21. Chapter 21

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Monday 11th June, 1984

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a couple of weeks from the previous chapter... in the middle of July, just at the peak of Summer, the Byers home had returned to a state where it no longer looked like a thoroughly abused bomb shelter.

"It's got a little while to go yet, but here's our house kids..." Joyce stood aside so the kids behind her could step in. El entered first, having never been formally welcomed into the Byers house, her new home. At her side was Will, bouncing excitedly on his heels as he took in the changes.

"The ceiling looks pretty good, Chief" he complimented the man behind him, who leaned against the doorway with a lazy smile, tool-belt still strapped around his waist. "Well, we did the best we could..."

"There isn't too much difference in here. But why don't you look at your new bedrooms? Will, you're in with Jonathan and El's in your old room." At their mother's words Will took off down the hall, dragging El behind him and showing her the house along the way. "You remember the bathroom right? That's mom's room. This is Jonathan's and my room, whoa bunk beds! And that's your room!" El shook her head at Will's hyper activeness, which she found matched the other boys' when he didn't put his guard up (such as at school or around unfamiliar people).

After a brief glimpse at the stacked beds and piles of boxes in the boys' bedroom, he tugged her one last time to the door at the end of the hall before pushing it wide open. He even let her go in first, before sticking his head in to look around as well. "Mom painted it for you..."

"Pretty..." she whispered happily, looking around and taking in as much as she could. The walls were a light pink and stencilled with flowers. In the far corner, the bed had a patched up quilt that reminded her of Nancy's with two fluffy white pillows. And the curtains were yellow, matching the drawers to make the room look sunny and cheery. "You need to put things in here so it feels like yours." Will explained. "I guess it looks okay though... for a girl's room."

"It's perfect." El insisted quietly, glaring at her brother sternly and making him laugh. A knock at the open door sounded and they both turned to find Jonathan with his camera slung around his neck. "Hey! Mom says come outside, photo time..."

"Sure Jonathan. Let's go El, you can check out your room after the photos..." Will stated, waiting for her to join them. She took a second more to look over the room with an approving smile before marching between the two boys back outside.

...

"Count of three okay? One, two..." They stood outside the house in the sunny afternoon light. To their right lay a dark patch of scorched grass layered over with autumn leaves and closer to the shed was another dark patch, the remnants of the monsters that burnt away to nothing but dust clouds upon their deaths. Convenient to the Byers, who didn't have to worry about yard clean-up. But it would've been nice to have evidence of their troubles and the government's conspiracies around...

El tried to keep still and smile as Jonathon took photo after photo from a million different angles.

"Oh come on Jonathan, you get in a couple!" Joyce took the camera from him and pushed him back towards the kids, where he stood between them with an awkward smile.

Even Hopper was bullied into one. "Jeez, I just came to finish off those last couple of holes in the roof..." he complained, taking off as soon as he could. El stayed put when the boys and their mom returned to the house, apparently set on watching out for him. "Hey

Jonathan, mind handing me that mesh in my truck?"

Before said person could even turn around the netting hovered out of the truck-bed and up to him. "Oh... thanks El!" Hopper exclaimed in momentary astonishment, having forgotten about the girl's unique abilities. "But you know... don't do that again, you know you need to keep your powers undercover right?"

"Right..." she replied, staring up at him with her endless and unblinking stare. He first pried off the wooden planks, glued over the holes to act as a temporary cover. Netting, then metal sheets and finally shingle were nailed down on top of it and set with filler paste.

"Eleven, don't you wanna head back inside?" Hopper asked halfway through the tasks, as the afternoon sun began to set below the treeline. The girl shook her head and pointed to him. "Don't fall..." she said. Hopper chuckled and turned back to fixing the roof. "You're looking out for me huh?"

"Yes."

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They had homemade burgers and fries with ice cream waiting for their first dinner together but Hopper had to leave for an emergency work call. Eleven stared at the food, a queasy look overtaking her face. "What's wrong El?" Joyce asked tensely, grabbing the girl's hand. She shook her head with sadness in her eyes, muttering "bad" under her breath. "What does that mean? Does it taste bad?" Jonathan asked worriedly, taking off his apron and coming over.

In all the fuss over El they didn't notice the few seconds Will was hunched over, before he woke up again and discreetly wiped the blood from his nose. He stood up to tell them quietly, "I think... Eleven has some forms of PTSD, Mom. It means she gets flashbacks when she looks at certain stuff... I'm pretty sure the food's making her remember. She told me before that she knew Mr Hammond from the diner before he was murdered, so I think... there's probably a connection there."

They all turned to the girl who was still staring at the burger with a

melancholy expression, and then back to the youngest Byers boy. "Will, where did you learn about PTSD? How could you come to even think of something like that?" Joyce asked, searching the young boy's knowing expression that held more wisdom than she could fathom an almost-13 year old having. He stayed quiet and didn't answer, but the look he shared with Jonathan was one of understanding that she wasn't a part of. These secrets filled her with immense pain, but she knew they couldn't really be helped...

With each day that passed she felt like a distance was growing between her and her youngest son, similar to what she'd had to experience with Jonathan but also different. She thought she'd done right by Will at least, when after his birth she found the strength to go through with the divorce. All he'd ever had to bear was the occasional bad-mouthed conversation over the phone, unlike Jonathan.

Her oldest boy... from a young age he'd been forced into self-dependency, both physically and mentally. There was a time when the arguments led to everything breaking, and yelling until her voice turned hoarse and resorting to screaming. Locking his bedroom and self away from her while she struggled with yet another emotional breakdown, it became the norm. Learning to cook and watch himself when she started working in place of her deadbeat long-gone 'husband' became the norm...

The guilt would never leave her. But even now, she still saw the love shining through both boys eyes, directed towards her, each other, and their new sister. She chose to ignore that mysterious wisdom that Will had picked up, that only made him even more similar to his brother...

"No burgers then, I'll remember that for later. Don't you worry about it Sis..." Jonathan winked at the girl, patting her shoulder and ignoring the slight flinch before getting up to make her a PB&J sandwich. He knew she ate those at least when he'd brought them to the hospital. Her plate of food was taken away as Jonathan came with the sandwich and a glass of milk.

"So we were at Lucas's with the ham-shack radio today, before you came to pick us up from Mike's, and his dad comes in and totally

freaks out over the set-up we have now!" Will said, starting up a conversation to get their minds off the incident. The Byers family resumed and finished their meal peacefully, halfway through answering the call from Nancy to say she was coming over with all of El's clothes and things she'd left behind at the Wheeler's house.

El felt better after the sandwich and milk, asking for another and remembering to thank Jonathan that time. After dinner Joyce kissed her head in reassurance and let her run off with Will to the living room while she cleaned up. The trouble was behind them for now, but she now had the knowledge of El's past and its hauntings. She would need to look out now more than ever for her new daughter...

...

It was late evening, an hour after dinner when the kitchen and table were clean and Joyce had left for work that the doorbell rang. Jonathan opened it expectantly to find Nancy, with the aforementioned boxes of El's things under her arms, and her brother behind her. "Come on in guys. Mike, they're just in the living room..."

The boy nodded and moved around them with an unusual glum expression. Even though he was always surprised to see the boys, for it seemed like they were growing and changing every day now, he was especially curious at the boy's gloomy demeanour. "What's his deal?"

Nancy shook her head and rolled her eyes. "It's his angst phase. He thought El was gonna live with us forever until they moved into their marital home, the sappy twerp..."

"He likes... Eleven? Since when? And your mom was still cool with them being under the same roof?" Jonathan asked in wondrous rapid-fire, his mouth almost dropping at the smirk and nod she gave. "Since last year. But it's harmless puppy-love..."

He declined to answer her, eyes narrowing. At 13 he'd felt a lot more than puppy-love for his crushes. They weren't exactly kids anymore and as her older-brother (as brief a period it still was) it was his job to be suspicious of Mike, and any boy around El that wasn't Will.

Jonathan and Nancy reached the end of the hallway and entered El's room. "You can leave them for mom to sort out. How are your parents?"

"Fine. Still as nuclear as ever..." Nancy rolled her eyes as she placed the boxes curled under her arms down, looking around. "It looks just like mine when I was younger..."

"Really?" She simply nodded before flashing him a smile. He followed her as she backtracked to his room that was now unpacked with an eclectic assortment of his and Will's stuff strewn about.

Posters of the clash, joy division and the smiths on one side and star wars and dungeons and dragons on the other. Textbooks and art-pads and supplies and a box of camera films waiting to be used stacked up and around the tape player. She sat down on the bed and picked up the drawer full of tapes lying by his pillow, perusing through the music.

Jonathan dropped down next to her, drawing an arm around her shoulders as she chose a David Bowie marked cassette and slid it into the player. "Good choice..." he remarked, humming along to Ziggy Stardust with her.

"You can never go wrong with Bowie, right?"

As she said this Nancy craned her neck up and caught his lips into the kiss she'd been craving all day. Soft at first but eventually heating up, she slyly licked his lower lip for permission to enter and explore.

Make-out sessions weren't uncommon those days. From their first kiss at the lookout until now, the two had become something... more. More than monster-hunting partners and best (living) friends. Lovers entwined with breath intermingling... they were in bliss.

Jonathan pulled away first, looking to the doorway. "Not here. The kids..." She nodded understandingly, untangling her hands from where they'd been creeping under his shirt and standing up to leave. "You've invaded my room before, just thought I'd return the favour..." with a sly wink she left him sitting there, frustrated.

"Mike? We're leaving now." Nancy called out to her little brother, who glared at her from his spot next to El on the floor. Said girl was busy talking to Will across the table, though she glanced at him every other second with worry. "Come on! Mom's waiting up for us." Said boy quickly got up and exited the room silently, leaving both the young Byers kids in dismay.

...

The drive home had been silent, as had that whole day he'd spent alone in his room. Mike pushed himself away from his desk, where his unfinished homework sat. With a sigh he sprawled his lanky body onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling.

He knew she'd leave with the Byers eventually, but time had passed too quickly. Gone were all the perks of having her so close. Coming home from school and knowing she was waiting in the basement to exchange stories of their days. Breakfast and Dinner at the same table, evenings when she asked and he explained everything about what it was like to grow up being normal... Who would explain things to her now? Will?

Mike couldn't help being jealous of his best friend, who would now be taking his place. He knew Will didn't see her that way, and wouldn't ever betray his trust like that... but still. There was apparently something about him that a lot of girls at school liked, for he was quite popular now. Maybe it was just the whole 'boy who came back to life' thing. But that just meant it was entirely possible that El could start crushing on Will...

'No! El likes YOU, she holds your hand and tells you secrets and no-one else... well, besides Will. Stupid telepathy advantage... wait, what if he's reading my mind now?'

He panicked, sitting up in bed and looking round for the ghostly upside down Will that might appear at any moment. 'No, he wouldn't. Just stop being a wastoid and go to sleep...' He willed his eyes shut, knowing he wouldn't be sleeping fitfully that night.

...

22. Chapter 22

...

Friday 29th June, 1984

...

Eleven gazed into the blackness once again, the ever-present knot of anxiety tightening further in her stomach as she spun around slowly. The darkness was trying its very best to swallow her back up. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and crouched down, tattered dress dipping into the damp ground below, hugging herself tightly and shaking her head in denial. 'No, no this isn't real! I'm not here again. I was saved... Will found me, Mike found me...'

It was a relief at first, when the darkness stopped tugging and swirled around her instead, to form a room of some kind. That was, before the achingly familiar cold tiles, concrete walls and harsh white light down long, empty corridors came into view. The lab from her early childhood had been reconstructed, this was the corridor she was dragged down for punishment, and the door at the end led to the dark room. That door was opening now...

'No... no...' She pleaded, frozen at the other end as the door was now wide and out wheeled a dark silhouette of a man in a wheelchair. She felt nauseated, like she couldn't breathe even because that man looked very much like-

"Eleven," Papa's voice echoes from that end the corridor, though no mouthing of words can be seen from the dark man. She hugs herself tighter and backs away, ready to bolt in the other direction. "Do as you're told. It's time for the bath..."

She shakes her head again, looking down, not realizing she's crying until she feels the hot tears trailing down her cheeks. The soft squeal of wheels rolling towards her only has the girl crying harder, scared of what's happening, and wondering how she was captured again and brought here by the bad men.

Her breathing is raspy and short, heart beating so rapidly it feels like it could come out of her chest. Dark again, the lights of the corridor are going out as he approaches. She closes her eyes... no more, no more, no more...

"El?" another voice calls, quieter, more hesitant. Eleven forces her eyes open and comes face to face with her worst nightmare. His mouth dripped with blood, as did his nose and ears. Big dark eyes wide and pleading behind his blood matted hair. Pleading with her to end his pain, before he crumpled to the ground in front of her. She screamed for Mike internally, but couldn't do so out loud because she was paralysed and numb again and-

She jerked awake, eyes opening wide and fearful as she shoved her tear-stained pillow away to fall to the floor. Turning over, El noted the little digital clock Joyce had given her read 5:33am. She was exhausted, even though she'd been in bed for more than eight hours...

The noiseless slide of her feet over hallway carpeting instead of freezing wood boards that creaked was still a new and unfamiliar sensation to her, even after she'd been living there for a few weeks now.

She was always restless after a nightmare and so took to wandering from wherever she'd slept. The Wheelers basement had offered plenty to distract from her thoughts, as did the Byers home.

They kept a much quieter household there than the Wheelers, of which she was secretly grateful. And Jonathan was almost as good a cook as Mrs Wheeler she found, certain foods like his home-made waffles (just like eggos, but better) and dinners had her eating gamely, even taking Will's leftovers when he didn't finish everything.

El was always the earliest to wake up. Her internal clock ran very different to the rest of the Byers, for she'd lived the first 12 years of her life without natural light and could stir herself in the dark.

She sat in the living room and stared at the TV until it turned itself on, then made the curtains draw themselves open so the still dim sky could be seen. It was the new routine she'd set up for herself, and no-one else seemed to mind...

"Good morning."

Eleven half-smiled at a bleary-eyed Jonathan who was heading immediately to the coffee-maker. After setting up the hot brew to drip, he plopped down next to her as she flipped the channels with her mind and eventually settled for Sesame-Street. "You've been practicing huh? Least we don't have to worry about a remote anymore..."

Eleven nodded, focused on the TV show but still turned towards Jonathan in case he needed something. "You feel like something else besides eggos this morning? It's Mom's birthday so I'm making French toast, for all of us if you'd like."

"What's French toast?" she asked, head tilting as she wondered how the French made their crispy bread different to them in America. Jonathan chuckled, "You'll see. I'll need help making everything..."

And so El moved to the kitchen counter and watched Jonathan mix the eggs up for their usual scramble before bringing out pieces of bread and making her cut them into triangles. "We just dip them in the egg and then in the pan to cook. Voila!" he said, in a funny voice that she didn't understand but still laughed along with. "Can you get that tray from the cupboard? And a wine glass for orange juice."

El did as ordered and under her older brother's guidance set up a nice breakfast tray, fluffy looking French toast smothered in syrup and a small pile of bacon on the side, with a tall glass of OJ and sweet black coffee in Joyce's favourite mug. "Perfect. Now you can go wake up Will so we can surprise Mom together, and I'll clean up."

El nodded with a big grin, tiptoeing past Joyce's room and reaching the boy's, where Will was just beginning to stir. "Will, wake up!"

"Hm? El, did I sleep in?" he asked lazily, squinting down at her from his high-up bed with his fringe flopping almost past his nose. El giggled and shook her head. "Jonathan says, get up. Birthday breakfast, for Mom."

"Birthday... oh shoot!" Will threw off his bed sheets and got up quickly, monkeying down to Jonathan's bed before reaching the

ground and immediately rummaging through one of his drawers. "I made Mom a present too, luckily you reminded me." They left the room as Jonathan brought over the tray, before they all three stood outside their mother's room. "1... 2... 3." A single knock from the door had the attention of its sole occupant, who croakily told them to come in.

"Sweetie, you didn't have to!"

The kids grinned as Joyce sat up in bed, flyaway hair all over the place and pyjamas and sheets rumpled. She'd recently gotten over a cold but still had the red nose and unclear throat to prove it. "Yes we did Mom. Your favourites of course, made by me and El." Jonathan stated, slinging an arm lazily around the still tiny girl who shyly stayed in the back.

"I drew you this, Mom. It's your portrait, we did them in art class last week."

Will presented the black and white charcoal sketch and both his siblings and his mother's jaws dropped. It was a simple face really, only a few lines with minimal shading and contour. But he'd managed to catch her likeness so well, it looked professionally done...

"That's beautiful honey" Joyce lay the picture gently and threw her arms around her son, "you two, get in here as well!" pointing to her other two children, who wordlessly agreed to the family hug.

Afterwards El got to try French toast herself, and found it was as good as Will had explained it to be. For Joyce though, just having all her kids safe and at home was enough of a present for her...

...

The unmarked car from out of town caught him off-guard at first. Sure, they'd last left him with a message that they'd keep in touch, but Hopper saw months go past without so much as a murmur about where (or even when) 'Hawkins Light and Energy' disappeared. The power-plant was abandoned and the outside looked unkempt and overgrown now. In his earlier days of trying to find a lead on Eleven,

he'd broken in again. But there was nothing...

Early that morning he'd been practically kidnapped, half-dressed and stuffed into the car with a blindfold and no explanation other than "we were asked to escort you to Dr. Brenner..."

Brenner. The white-haired scientist whom Eleven called Papa... so what the boys said wasn't true then. He hadn't been killed by the Demogorgon.

Hopper remained silent the whole drive, feeling the presence of a man right next to him, and the other in front driving. His hands were tied as a precaution, which he subtly struggled against in an attempt to free himself. Not like there was much else to do...

"We're here."

Hopper heard the door open to his right. A hand gripped his arm and he complied with getting up and out. He felt the gravel beneath him turn to the crunch of plant-life, maybe a corn field? And then noise, a lot of it. It sound and felt like the earth was shaking below them.

The sound of clanking metal opening, and down a steep slope they walked. Hopper tried his best to keep track of his bearings, but they'd walked and driven so far out of town at this point that he was lost. He'd never find his way back here...

"Sit down. The seat's to your left."

He did as ordered, staring straight ahead and letting the blindfold fall from his eyes. The interrogation room looked exactly the same as the one he'd been in last year...

And right in front of him sat the doctor he wished more than anything was dead at this moment. Hidden in a shroud of half-light, leaning back in the wheelchair with his fingertips pressed together contemplatively. Martin Brenner had become the evil supervillain from the old comics he used to read as a kid, come to life.

"Chief Hopper."

"Brenner. So you're still alive..."

"Hmh, barely." Into the dim light between them he leaned forward, revealing the shrouded part of his face to the police chief, who drew a sharp intake of breath. While the right side of his face was unmarred, the left was covered in healed-over stitches. Half of his head was shaved down and scarred, mottled skin running down his scalp and under his crisp business suit. Some things hadn't changed at least...

"You must know why you're here at least." Brenner stated, his gaze as inquisitive and unflinching as always. Hopper sighed, "I do. You want Eleven back?"

"Not want. We need her." Brenner stated matter-of-factly, expression unchanging as Hopper's hardened. "We both know what I think of that Brenner, so I'll need your explanation on exactly why." He knew that in this situation, where he stood with Eleven on the 'good guys' side and the government officials opposed them, he had the upper-hand. They wouldn't take her by force, not after what happened last year...

He didn't answer at first, slowly moving towards the table to prop his elbows against it and lean his head on his hands. "Do you think we're the bad guys?" he asked simply, raising a non-existent brow. "We do things for a reason here. Eleven, while she was here with us, became the saviour for this country. You couldn't even imagine her capabilities..."

Hopper chose not to answer that. Instead, he stared at the left hand of the doctor's that was just as scarred as his face. "The war is reaching its peak, Hopper. They have missiles, the Soviet Union. Bombs are pointed towards us, as we speak. At any moment they could be let off..."

The cold war. It wouldn't be called that for another 10 years, but Brenner had already prophesised the warfare and destruction they would face in the future. "She won't come. Even if I try to convince her, you know..."

"You've yet to try though. We're both aware of your negotiation skills." Brenner gave him a wry smile, one that wasn't returned.

Hopper was escorted out of the laboratory, blindfolded once again. He felt the strain of his legs going uphill, before they reached topsoil and the awaiting car. God knows what time it was at that point.

And then he was home again and his hands were untied, blindfold removed. Left to carry on with his day, and the new task set before him of convincing El to comply with the bad men that she despised...

...

23. Chapter 23

...

Tuesday 3rd July, 1984

...

"What'd you guys get for the question 12, the last one?"

"Square root of 2." "Twice the square root of 2." "Half the square root of 2."

The three differing answers immediately caused the three boys Mike, Lucas and Dustin to get into a squabble as they figured out which of them was right. Will, the least numerically inclined of the group, simply rolled his eyes and crawled over to Eleven, who was quietly working through the extra homework sheet he'd picked up for her from school. "Have you figured it out yet?"

"Positive and negative... root 2 over 2. Same as... 3 pi over 4?" she asked, quietening the room as the other three boys scrambled to their workbooks and checked. "Damnit!" Lucas muttered, erasing the mistake he'd made while working out his answer and sighing as he now had to restart. "Ughh I missed the fraction!" Mike exclaimed smacking his forehead. "And I would've been right, if I remembered the negative as well..." Dustin shook his head and took off his hat to ruffle his already tousled curls. "We're gonna blow at the scholastic decathlon next year..."

"Come on Dustin don't think like that. This is high-school level stuff. And besides, El's gonna join the team next year, right El?"

The girl simply shrugged, pushing the finished worksheet aside to be immediately grabbed by Will so he could copy the answers. Mike snatched it off the smaller boy, who smiled sheepishly. "Come on Mike! I didn't even wanna do this extra credit thing... I'm fine with passing Math at C+..."

"You're making it a B." Mike replied firmly, "Now stop cheating off

her. You don't wanna be in math-club next year El?"

Again she shrugged, standing up and smoothing the front of her yellow dress. "Don't know... if I'll like it..."

"But you figure the equations out faster than us and never get them wrong! That snooty boarding school Winchester'll beat us again if you don't join... please join!" Dustin pleaded, grovelling at her feet which she promptly ignored on her way to the kitchen for a well-deserved snack. Lucas rolled his eyes at the over-dramatic display the other boy was putting on, "you should work harder yourself instead of tryna recruit the weirdo to win for us..."

"What Lucas said... and don't call her a weirdo!" Mike asked.

Lucas and Dustin snickered and promptly made kissing motions together directed at teasing him for defending El, earning a swift kick to each of their shins. Will used that time to sneakily finish copying El's homework before he stood up with a cheer. "Yeah! B, Here I come!"

El sat on the kitchen counter with her snack (PB spread on eggos) and watched the chaos erupting across the dining room table. Mike was chasing Will down while Dustin and Lucas had gotten in another squabble and were now throwing paper balls at each other. Will tripped and collided into Lucas, sending both boys down in a flurry of scrap paper while Dustin got up to grab El's homework from Mike for himself.

Eventually the boys all got too tired of fighting and got up again. "Finished?" El asked Mike, swishing her skirt side to side cuter than she'd ever know. "Maybe... show you? How to get... the answers?"

It was the best suggestion they'd heard that afternoon. And also the solution and prevention of almost all of the previous hell that broke loose with them.

...

That afternoon spent together now coming to an end, the boys clambered onto their bicycles outside of the Byers home. The sun was

still high up in the sky, but since Ms Byers refused to let them stay out late around their side of town, they had to make do with the little time they had together. "Bye guys!" Lucas called over his shoulder, while Dustin did a quick drive-by and high-fived Will who stood with them in the dusty driveway. "See you tomorrow! Don't forget to bring that comic over for me!"

He glanced back at his sister, noting with a raised eyebrow that Mike had stopped her from going back inside to talk. Since they were blocking his way back inside though, he wandered over to them quietly.

"Are you still having those dreams? About the bad men?" Mike asked, after staying silent beside her the whole time on the walk out of the house together. El paused for a second, deciding just how truthful she should be. "Yes." she finally settled on, nodding guiltily. "Joyce... helps..."

"But...?" he questioned, sensing her reluctance to elaborate further. "She's tired... after work."

"If you don't wanna wake Ms Byers then use the ham-shack to call me, anytime you have those nightmares..." Mike finished, brow furrowed as El bowed her head.

He gripped the handlebars of his bike tightly, wanting to grab her hand and comfort her the only way he knew how. "Thank you..." she whispered, finally looking up at him again with a small smile that she returned. Their moment was interrupted as Will said "Wait, nightmares? Why didn't you say something El?"

"You didn't already know? I thought you and El were like... connected, or something." Mike replied, frown deepening with a hint of bitterness towards his other telepathic friend. Will shook his head, "No, she's just like the rest of you guys to me. And I don't just sneak around people's private thoughts! That's a totally lame thing to do..."

Those words seemed to have a profound effect on the Wheeler boy, who released an audible sigh of relief. "You thought I was doing that?" Will asked incredulously, shoving Mike's shoulder while El stared at them both in confusion.

"Dinner's ready!" Jonathan suddenly yelled out from inside, drawing everyone's attention. "Oh, well uuuh I guess I gotta go. Dinner's probably waiting at home too. Sorry I thought you were a mind perv."

Will half-grinned at him, "C'mon dude, I'm Will the wise. Only scum the likes of Troy would abuse mind powers like that... and bye." With that he ran inside, glancing at El who seemed to be debating internally on something. "You okay El?"

"Yes. Bye Mike. See you... soon." Her creased brow relaxed as she turned back to the doorway next to Will. Mike simply waved before turning to ride off after Lucas and Dustin.

...

Wednesday 4th July, 1984

...

School was out for the fabled holiday that consisted of eating delicious food and playing backyard games until evening when the fireworks started, and little to do with observance of the actual reason for said holiday.

Nancy was in the kitchen helping her mom make the delicious picnic spread, burger meat off to the side waiting for her father to fire up the grill, pecan pie cooking in the oven and currently they were both preparing snacks for when the Sinclairs and Hendersons arrived. Joyce and Jonathan were going to be late since they both took shifts for stock-taking over the holiday while everyone else spent their day off not at work.

When the doorbell rang that late morning and El appeared from around the corner a moment later, neither Karen nor Nancy questioned it. Instead they both gave her hugs as Will and Mike also entered. "You ready for your first independence day party?" Nancy asked, ruffling her hair.

El nodded, smiling as Mrs Wheeler pulled out the mouth-watering piping hot pie from the oven and the smell wafted over to her. "You

can be the first to try this, as soon as it cools off."

"I'm going to set up the game now. You coming?" Mike asked, turning away from the food he knew he wouldn't get to try until later (his mom was only ever lenient with El and Holly). He huffed when El shook her head, dejectedly stalking off with a nonchalant Will. "She never lets me eat pie straight from the oven..."

"Didn't you get sick that one time from shovelling too much pie in your face when we were like six?" Will asked in reply, "and they're girls, they always favour each-other more..."

...

An hour later (just past noon) Dustin and Lucas arrived with their families and the party officially set off in the Wheelers' backyard. Younger children weaved in and out of their parent's legs and were shooed away from Ted and the other dads at the grill, while the moms sat under the cool shade of the oak tree in their colourful sun dresses with pink lemonade. Nancy was the only person in her age group there, self-designated to dishing out the little hotdogs, sandwiches, bite-sized cakes and biscuits and lemonade they had for their guests.

The door was wide open to the basement, offering a cool breeze that fluttered her skirt as El leaned over the table and played her favourite game with her favourite people. They were finishing off the campaign from last week, stuck in a desert and fighting giant scorpions and heat exhaustion as they tried to navigate their way out.

"Attack him and save Mike, Lucas!" "I've only got my level 2 mallet and a rusty dagger though!" "No, I can cast minor illusion and escape!" "I have a healing spell..."

Will hastily scribbled down all the details of their moves, only glancing up once when Nancy came to the doorway with a tray heavily laden with food and drink. "You're the DM today Will?"

He nodded quietly, eyes widening just as much as the other boy's as she set the tray next to him and looked down at his character sheet, obscured from the other players. "What do you want Nancy?" Mike

asked.

"Nothing. Just thought I'd bring you guys' snacks before they all ran out. Those little munchkins ate all the hotdogs already..."

Jamie, Lucas's little sister and Dustin's baby cousins who'd come over with his aunt and uncle could be heard giggling with Holly as they ran around the green patch they'd been confined to by watchful eyes. "Thanks Nancy." El took the liberty to say, smiling at the older girl she deeply admired.

"Yeah, thanks Nancy." Dustin's still toothless grin was wide as he grabbed a cold glass and downed half of its contents before reaching for the snacks first. The game continued past Jonathan and Joyce's late arrival together, only stopped by the smaller kids annoying them to play duck-duck goose and tag instead.

By evening the dads brought the fireworks out and all the kids were given sparklers to play with. A grand lightsabre fight broke out, led by Dustin, Lucas and Will and the kids squealed in delight as sparks trailed across the sky.

Mike sat down next to a quiet El, under the tree, as said girl stared awestruck at the sparkling stick. "Are you having fun?"

She nodded, turning to face him as the last of their sparklers burned down. Their moment was interrupted by Will dropping down at El's other side to catch his breath. "Man I'm tired. Jonathan says the show's gonna start soon." Lucas and Dustin joined them as well. "I wanna hold roman candles like last year." "Man, your mom's an awesome cook..."

When the show started the three boys stood up and moved as close as they could to the display of booming lights and multi-coloured pyrotechnics. That left just El and a dry-mouthed Mike, who wasn't sure what to do as her unsettling stare turned to focus on him. "Mike?" she asked, between the noise and flashing lights that illuminated their faces periodically.

"Yeah El?" he answered, dry-mouthed and strangely nervous. "In the kitchen, Nancy talked... about kissing."

"K-kissing? What about it?" He could hear the several octaves his voice had raised, pitch as high as it had been last year before puberty started hitting them all (and with it the growth spurts and voice changes).

"What she said... we did that? Before the pud-ding, at school?" she asked. It was all that Mike could do but stare straight ahead of him and stutter out a reply. "Y-yeah... like I said. W-when you... when you like someone..."

"Someone like more, than a friend?"

He nodded mutely, feeling the blush spread across his face as she slowly leaned forwards, closer and closer towards him as did he, like they were being pulled in by a gravitational force. Their lips met for the second time in their lives, only this time they were both aware of what exactly was happening.

It was as brief as the first, and both their lips were just as dry but warm as the first. But she stood back from him with just as dazed an expression as the first, and he felt just as good and warm after that kiss... as the first.

"I like you, more than a friend... too." El whispered, before turning back to the display and leaning her head on his shoulder. Mike was in a stupor, blissfully unaware when Dustin, Lucas and Will returned and immediately caught sight of them cuddled together and started mocking for it.

...

Monday 8th July, 1984

...

She wasn't sure what was happening. At the Byers dining table while everyone was either at school or work, she sat across from the police chief. She liked Hopper, he was big and tall, but quiet, like Jonathan. Always brooding, but when he caught onto her staring his hard face softened into a big smile and he'd reach out to ruffle her hair or start talking.

They were meant to be on their way to the Ives home for her weekly visit right now, but he'd stopped her here. And by the looks of it, he wanted to talk about something important.

"Go now?" she asked, twiddling her fingers after the long silence that just passed. He shook his head, "sorry Eleven, we have to talk about something first."

"Talk about what?" she asked, frowning as he leaned back in his seat with a deep sigh. "Do you remember Dr. Brenner? I think you might have called him... Papa." Large hazel eyes widened to the size of coins, before narrowing dangerously. Her fingers stopped twiddling and spread out on the table, curling into claws. "What about him?"

Her tone was dark and threatening, whole demeanour changed from the innocent happy child who'd just been impatient to see his birth-mother before. Now she was tense and on high-alert for danger. "Are the bad men coming?"

Hopper shook his bowed head in reply. "They won't come, you scared them off too good for that El. But... they're not dead. Brenner is still alive, the place you came from is still running."

This news didn't strike her with fear nearly as much as she thought it would. A raised eyebrow, arms crossing as she leaned back in her seat as well. "So?"

"So..." he mimicked, "they still want you. Even if they're not gonna force you to them, you won't escape so easily. Wait... I'm sorry Eleven. Do you understand what I'm telling you?" He'd never been good at treating children like what they were. Sarah had been a tiny adult, speaking full sentences by her second birthday and much more mature than the average toddler, so he'd never really learned to talk down. It seemed Eleven was the same as his little Sarah, as she scrunched her brow together in frustration and replied "Hopper, I understand."

"Oh, well... good."

"Good." She replied, a ghost of a smile appearing for just a moment. She'd shown herself to be prodigal in many things, catching up to the

boys level of knowledge in the few months she'd begun her home-schooling and even surpassing them in some things. She knew what the bad men were capable of, intuitively, they had a hand in everything, in every person's lives.

"When did they come for you?" she asked, relaxing her stance and surprising him even further. "How'd you...? never mind. Last week."

"And like you said... they want me."

"To listen. Like you used to? I don't know the details of what they made you do El, but you know they wouldn't hurt you like they used to. The upside down is off limits, they don't want that anymore."

Eleven nodded. "Okay. When?"

"When what?" he asked, dumbstruck for the third time that morning. She rolled her eyes. "When do we go? To the lab."

"Uhh... when they come for us again, I guess."

"I'll know when."

The conversation was confusing. She was confusing. Hopper shook his head in disbelief and stood up. "Let's just go, Terry's probably waiting. We'll talk more about this later."

...

Sunday 14th July, 1984

...

'This blows...' she thought, staring at her worn sneakers with the ratty laces as she sat there on the cold ground leaning against a tree in the forest. Her hand cradled the still aching bruise at the top of her cheekbone, one she hadn't expected to get just the night before...

Her mother was crazy, but never before had she resorted to violence with her daughters. The argument the day before consisted of her asking if it was time for Carrie to come to school with her yet (the girl looked even more sickly from not running around outside

enough), being told no, and then mouthing off at the woman a few too many times before a backhand to her face caught her off guard.

As tough as she liked to think she was, Max was no match for the full-grown woman, no matter how bird-like she may appear. And it made her feel weak that she couldn't hold her own against her mother, the ultimate enemy, who she was meant to save herself and her sister from. Carrie deserved a stronger sister...

"Max?"

The quiet voice alerted her to her friend's (quickly growing to best friend status) presence. From the bushes stepped the smaller girl, wearing a light blue summer dress and cardigan that she would despise on any other girl their age (including herself).

"Hey."

"What happened?" she asked immediately, dropping to her knees in front of the gloomy girl. "My mom... she's such a bitch."

El had heard that word before. Nancy had called Carol a bitch once, whoever Carol was, because she bad-mouthed the late Barb at school (a conversation she happened to be present for between the girl and her mother).

She didn't know how to comfort the girl, opting instead to lean back against the tree next to her and curl into her usual ball. Her dress was probably dirty but that wasn't important, her friend was hurting. "Max, can you come to my house?" she asked suddenly, struck with an idea.

The other girl looked up at her, surprised. "Why?"

"It's cold..." she feigned, standing up again and sticking her hand out for Max to grab. "Come."

After a few moments of silent deliberation, the tomboyish girls grabbed the proffered hand and hauled herself forward. "Fine, I was getting bored of walking the tracks all the time anyways. This town's too small..."

...

Mike and Lucas were going to the Byers home today, short of Dustin since he'd been gone all weekend, out of state to visit his grandparents. The front door was wide open and the sound of raucous laughter could be heard inside, inciting them to yell out before entering.

"Waddup guys?!" Lucas said, waltzing in goofily and kicking off his shoes before clambering his way over the couch to fist-bump Will. "Dude!" "Hello."

"Hey strong-man..."

The teasing voice made him falter, leaning forward too far and face-planting the cushions in front of him as the familiar friend of theirs from school entered the living room as well. "M-max?!"

"In the flesh." She was the only who called him that, a play on his D&D nickname 'the strong' that she'd known beforehand along with everything else about them (El's doing, they eventually realised). "What brings you guys to my second home?"

"Well aren't you comfortable..." Mike remarked, smirking at his friend's totally uncool display of being sprawled out on the floor from the couch and shifting past him to sit by El. "Morning Mike. Can Max play for Dustin today?"

Mike shrugged, leaning back on the girl's legs and looking up in contemplation as he placed their game-board on the coffee table. "If she knows how to play why not?"

"I'll teach her." El stated excitedly, taking Dustin's character sheets from his arms and gesturing for her to come over and sit on the couch too. "Hey, I didn't agree to this..." Max rolled her eyes, joining anyways.

The game didn't last as long as a normal campaign would because she had to leave only an hour later. By this point in time the boys had been informed (somewhat) of her home-life, and knew not to ask or interfere too much. "When ARE we gonna meet your sister though?"

Mike asked, packing away the character pieces with care while Max sat next to him, still going over the character sheets.

"When I can convince her the world outside isn't that scary. She's got a million phobias thanks to my mom..." The other kids looked between each-other, somewhat silently agreeing that it wasn't so unfair to call the outside world scary...

"The poor girl. Did she ever go to school?"

This question came from Joyce, recently returned from the grocery store and packing away the food items in the kitchen. Their introduction and time together was very brief so far, but Max had already warmed to the woman. She was nice enough, hugging the reluctant girl on meeting her. But she smelt like cigarettes and dressed different to other ladies, no dresses or bright colours in sight. There was steel in her voice and hardness in her demeanour, and also based on how El had appraised her adoptive mother, Max had some pre-set standards of this woman that weren't disappointed.

Max shook her head. "My mom never let her, says she just isn't ready..."

"How can she know that if she hasn't tried?" Joyce frowned, coming over to the girl after noticing the yellowish patch at the top of her cheekbone. "I have some ointment for that honey." No questions asked, she smiled at the young girl and stroked her cheek.

"Hey, when did you get that?" Lucas asked instead, looking at the bruise that was now being tended to with surprise. He hadn't been close enough before to see it, but in the clear light of just after noon it was very much apparent. "I can't remember, it was probably something stupid..." Max shrugged it off and kept her expression blank as she turned away from him. "I have to go home now..."

"We'll walk with you as well!" Will volunteered, returning from the bathroom. Max shrugged again, heading to the doorway. "It was nice meeting ya Ms Byers."

"You too Max, don't be a stranger."

...

The girl's trip to the junkyard went quicker than usual since they all decided a foot-race was a good idea, and everyone joined in, even El. At the forefront was Lucas and Max, the most athletically inclined of the group of misfits. They pushed each-other into obstacles on the path and grew more competitive with every step. "Screw you Sinclair! I'm not giving up my deck!"

"You think I wanna haul your ass to school every morning? Screw you too!" Lucas dashed ahead a few inches, his footsteps faster though her strides outpaced his. They'd placed their bets halfway through the race in the heat of the moment, and there was no backing down now. As the junkyard bus came into view around the corner, Max took a huge leap forward and stuck her foot out to the side. Lucas was too quick and light on his feet to be tripped, instead jumping into a combat roll and sprawling out on the dirt track while Max won by touching the bus. "WINNER!"

"CHEATER!" Lucas spat, getting up immediately, red-faced as she punched the air. "There were no rules, what I did was legal and I'll be expecting you here waiting tomorrow morning." She stuck her tongue out teasingly, only causing the boy more anger and frustration. "I'll get you back for this White..."

"Oh god..." Mike, Will and El finally showed up, all out of breath and huffing in as much oxygen as their lungs would allow. "Should... slow down..." El gasped out, clutching the stitch in her side. Will was the worst off, red-faced and sweaty hair clinging to his forehead. "Uuuh... guys... who's that?"

His extended index finger pointed past Max and Lucas, who turned around and immediately froze in their spots. A ghost of a girl with pale skin like snow, even fairer than Mike, crouched half behind a nearby junkyard car. Her pale lashes and eyebrows disappeared behind heavy, uneven bangs of dark blonde.

"CARRIE?!" Max cried, going over to the girl crouching down. "What are you doing here by yourself?!"

"Mom went to look for you..." she whispered, too quiet for everyone

but the nearby Lucas's ears. "It's not safe."

"We need to leave now. Sorry guys..." Max glanced worriedly back at the other kids, who all seemed in a stupor at the strange girl's appearance for different reasons. Among the pairs of eyes watching her, Carrie found a mixture of thoughts and emotions. The dark eyes of the tall boy with freckles, mostly concerned. Fierceness behind another dark pair, of the brown skinned boy that was yelling at Max as she'd been teasing him (he understood wanting to yell at her sister, she wanted to sometimes). And then the lighter eyes of the smaller boy and the other girl, both transfixed in awe at her, making her feel funny. Why were they looking at her like that?

"Come on Care, home time..." Max tugged at her arm and waved the other kids away. "See you guys at school tomorrow."

"Yeah, bye..." Lucas shook his head, it was totally déjà vu, feeling just like the first time they'd met El in the woods. Maybe they'd have another weirdo join the group. He turned back to the transfixed siblings that Mike was trying to gain the attention of. "What's wrong with those two?"

Mike shrugged, "beats me. El! Hey!" It took a few shakes of her shoulders before she came to, as did Will on his own. "Earth to Will, hey, that's blood!" Lucas exclaimed.

Will shook his head and immediately lifted a sleeve to his nose as he stood back from Lucas. "S-sorry, I totally zoned out there..."

"Yeah you did." "Was it the upside-down again?" Mike asked him in a panic, still holding El's shoulders and examining her but turned to face him. "No, it was... well, this is gonna sound strange..."

"We've probably heard stranger things *(@ J @)*..." Lucas insisted, grabbing his shoulder while Mike took El's hand, together leading their group back the way they came. "Okay, don't ask me how I know this because even I'm not sure. But Max's sister, Carrie... she's one of us."

"One of us? What d'you mean?" Lucas inquired further. "One. Of. Us. She's like me and El."

"Max's sister has superpowers too? You could tell all that just from meeting her once?" Mike elaborated for him with the questions, letting him nod along at the words he hadn't been able to articulate. Will bit his lip, not sure how he could explain the story when he could barely breathe.

He'd felt something all the way back on the railroad tracks, but it was easily ignored as they started off running strong. As they approached though, his intuition grew stronger, telling him that something wasn't right. A force was pushing him back, he knew El felt it too and was struggling to fight the urge to turn around and head home.

'You felt it too, right?' her thoughts drifted into his head, as she stared at him in amazement. He nodded silently, mustering up the strength to explain how he'd felt such a force and immediately thought to use his powers and find the source. How he's encountered a barrier in the upside down, even stronger. It flung his astral projection right back into his body and made him weak now.

"Oh boy, what are we in for now?" Lucas asked, shaking his head in disbelief at Will's words.

...

The plot thickens.

...

Author's notes:

I'm sorry in advance! I haven't taken enough time to read through and edit this chapter (it's the longest so far), but I just wanted to post since it feels like it's been forever. I always post a rough copy early and edit it later on and repost (not the best writing style, I know).

Please be nice in your thoughts and reviews :(hyper stressed during exam period and assignments due and work, writing this is one of the few true joys I'm allowing myself.

Also, I've added dates to the chapters if you're interested in the timeline of this story. It's progressing very slowly, and I don't know when it will end...

Dustin was gone with his family (not here, in this chapter), more reminding myself than you guys.

spoiler for future chapter (maybe not the next)

'A malevolent force rises from deep within her, unfathomable, unsung, unexpected and undetected by none but the pair of beings whose connection with her transcends the boundaries of the humble acrobat. Three fleas, three universes. A third monster?'

WHAT THE FUCK?!

Lol it's 3:34am and I'm wired. If this message is weird sorry.

Sorry.

...

24. Chapter 24

...

Wednesday 17th July, 1984

...

Today was going to be a great day, Dustin just knew it.

That morning he woke to the sound of birds singing and smell of pancakes cooking and smiled to himself. He left his bedroom and found both his parents at the table, as well as his anticipated stack of warm goodness and syrup waiting.

"Happy birthday son." His father was the first to say, smiling at him from over his newspaper. "After school you and your friends be ready by 1600 hours. We'll head off before evening light."

"Roger that sir." Dustin hovered his pancakes and smiled at his mom sweetly when she added an extra stack. "Thanks mom."

"Just for today sweetie. You'll get a stomach-ache eating this many..." his mother warned, before turning towards his bear of a father who had to lean down several feet to kiss her cheek before heading to work at the construction site.

Dustin left soon after to change out of his pyjamas and rinse his mouth out with the special liquid toothpaste his orthodontist had given him. Although his front baby teeth had fallen out now and there were little nubs of adult size coming in, they were very sensitive and needed special care to grow strong.

The first people he ran into on the way to school were Max and Lucas, the former holding tight to the latter's back-rest as he pulled her along. For his own birthday in March Lucas's parents had gotten him a new bike, banana-seated like Mike's but a little bigger, painted black and camouflage.

"Morning ladies..." Dustin teased, pulling up by them and making them both roll their eyes. "Happy birthday dude. Here, glad you

didn't wear one today." Lucas threw something across to the other boy who eagerly stopped to look at it.

"It's your birthday? Shit, I didn't know..." Max interjected, glaring at Lucas half-heartedly. "Why didn't you say earlier?"

"I didn't think to. And anyways, you never told us your birthday when we asked so I'm not telling you ours..." Lucas rolled his eyes at the awkward shove and command of "whatever, onwards steed!" while Dustin quietly assessed his new baseball cap with approval. It was his favourite colour, bright red, and had an offset blue superman logo on it. "Nice! You're second on best gifts so far Sinclair..."

"Second to who?" he asked indignantly, knowing he was the first of the guys to see his friend. "My dad of course." Dustin replied pointedly, eyeing him like it was obvious. "Oh." Lucas replied somewhat bashfully, before shrugging. "We're going after school. Max, you're invited too." Dustin added as an afterthought, "Dad can drive the minivan there..."

"Invited? Where?" She asked, startled and trying to hide her flattery at the people she'd called friends for barely over a month including her. "Comic-book store, arcade, Mc Donalds and then movies. Best night ever, right?"

"And on a school night too! S'gonna be awesome." Lucas declared, turning the corner and coming up to Will's house. Said boy came out with El behind him. "Did you read the paper? Ghostbusters has been out in Indianapolis all week and it came to our theatre yesterday! But it's rated PG-13..." Will stated in way of greeting.

"My dad's coming in with us, we'll all get in." Dustin reassured him. "Oh, and happy birthday!" Will produced the present he had behind his back. It was a comic book he'd drawn himself, "packed with all the adventures we've had so far in DD, mostly about Dustin the Awesome though..."

"That's cool! I'll read it later." Dustin tucked it in his bag while El finished chatting quietly with Max and Lucas before turning to Dustin and presenting him a box.

"Brownies. Me and Jonathan, made." she stated with an intense expression as she opened the box for him to look. Brownies were his favourite and he took the box and grabbed one to try. "Mmmmmh... good! You made them good El."

Her eyes shone with happiness as he patted her shoulder affectionately. "Good" she whispered with a smile. "Don't forget you're coming with us tonight okay? You and Max."

El nodded, waving at them all as Will took off with them to be escorted on his way to school. Joyce came out a few moments later. "Is he gone already?"

"Yes. School now?" El asked, receiving a confirming nod from her mother and running back in to set up the kitchen table for her lessons. She knew that the sooner she got the hang of 7th grade literature (pre-algebra and geometry were no problem) she'd be good to go for public school.

They made it to Mike's house where he sat on the doorstep waiting patiently. "Finally!" he yelled out, immediately shoving his hand out as Dustin pulled up to him expectantly. "These are for you..."

"Awww Mike, you shouldn't have..." he teased, examining the unopened limited edition pack of baseball cards now in his hands. "I don't like baseball as much as you and Lucas anyways." Mike stated, 'or sports watching in general...'

They rode to school together, then spent the day there as usual in class. There was one minor hiccup for Dustin when during their lunch-break Troy and his band of bullies came into the cafeteria and stalked up to their bench.

"Hey losers, I heard it was your birthday toothless..." Troy stated with a smirk, stealing his baseball cap as Dustin shouted hey! and shoving it on his own head. "Nice hat, mind if I borrow it?"

The other boys stood up next to Dustin and his friends sneered back disdainfully, knowing with his powerful build he could take on the four geeks easily. He turned to Will next, "queer, you gonna cry huh? You look like fat tears could leave those eyes at any second."

"Troy, give me back my hat!" "And screw you!" Dustin and Mike said together, while Lucas moved in front of a trembling Will. The whole cafeteria of 100 and something children was quiet now, all looking on at the fight with anticipation.

"You didn't ask nicely toothless, so I'm gonna have to keep it." Troy declared, turning the hat backwards on his head. "You should, it looks really good on you..."

The four nerdier boys stared in disbelief as Max moved from around the other side of the bench, going right up to Troy's face who also seemed to be disbelieving. "Uhhhh, who are you?"

"Mary. It's really nice to meet you Troy, I know all about the star line-backer and heart-throb on campus already..." she stated with a sweet smile, bowing her head coquettishly. Despite the tomboyish appearance and band-aids covering her elbows and knees she smiled sweetly and looked as much as she could like a normal girly girl. It seemed to work as well, when Dustin mouthed 'who are you?' and Lucas squinted as if he didn't recognise her.

"Mary, huh? W-why are you here w-with the freaks?" Troy asked, seemingly dazed by the big smile and pearly white teeth showing, making Lucas clench his jaw angrily. "I'm new, they were showing me around."

"O-oh, well you'd be better off... w-with me, we'd have more fun." he declared, smirking. Max's eyes flashed as she moved even closer and leaned into his ear. "Sure. Just one thing?"

"What is it?"

"Can I have that hat?" she asked, so sweetly that he immediately complied and pushed it into her waiting outstretched palm. That was when her sweet expression scrunched up in anger and she immediately brought up her foot to kick him between the legs.

"OOOHHHH!" The entire cafeteria jeered as Troy went down with his hands clutching his privates. Even Mike and the other guys grimaced with the phantom pains they experienced. Max kicked him in the side twice before spitting out "don't mess with my friends! Come on guys."

and they left the cafeteria before the dumbstruck jock friends of his or the teachers on duty could do anything about it.

...

"You were so cool!" Dustin yelled to her as they rode home as quickly as they could to get ready for the evening's activities. Max took the praise with an easy smile, "I know, no need to thank me anymore-HEY!"

"Oops sorry, pothole." Lucas gave her a wan smile as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders more securely. "I should've stayed on my board."

"Nah, this is way easier, I couldn't drag you over the pathway half the time anyway if you recall." Max tightened her jaw but eventually conceded to his point. "I'm not coming anyways."

"What, why?" Mike asked, slowing down to meet her glum looking face. "I haven't got any money and my mom won't give me any. Just take me home."

"No way! El's been looking forward to hanging out with you since we told her about it!" Will insisted vehemently. "We'll all put in a dollar for you, right guys?"

"Sure." "Can do." "I'll buy your movie ticket and food." The last statement from Lucas had the boy looking off to the side a little too shiftily, but she grinned nonetheless. "Wow, thank you."

Being around the boys thus-far, Max learned just how close their party was. Being one of them, you had someone to do everything with. They travelled around school as a single unit, never straying far from eachother for long.

From what she'd heard, they ate dinner at eachother's houses four nights a week, Wheelers then Sinclairs then Hendersons and finally Byers. They even had walkie-talkies for 24 hour unmonitored communication, and a more high-powered system to reach the other three from the far-out Byers home.

Max had never experienced that, growing up as a city-rat where

friends were few and far between and always back-stabbed you in the end. Or maybe it was because they were all kind of weird? As a tomboy, she related to the nerdy, sci-fi loving boys on another level being a fellow outsider. With each day spending time with them that passed Max felt less like an outsider and more like she'd become part of a blood-gang. It was pretty cool, actually...

...

She waited outside on Lucas's doorstep with Will while the three boys on Maple street went to their houses to get themselves ready. "You can even sleep over with El if your mom tries to... hurt you, again."

Max hitched her breath in as Will reached a hand out to the faded bruise on her cheek. "Don't freak out too much, okay?"

"How'd you know? Did El say something?" she demanded to know, eyes going cold. Will shook his head. "I have powers too, like El. We're not just siblings on paper I guess..."

"Really? You can read minds?" she said in awe, and somewhat anger. "Do you know what I'm thinking now?"

"I can know if I try. But I'm not trying, I don't just do it for nothing. People deserve privacy..." Will saw her immediately relax, and felt bad about the next add-on. "But... because I'm always around my family, that means El, their thoughts kind of drift into my head... not on purpose, but I can't help hearing. Sorry."

"Like you said, you can't help it." Max shrugged her shoulders but turned away from him. "So I suppose you know how I feel about... strong-man?"

"Huh? You mean Lucas?" Will was confused for all of the five seconds it took to realise as she turned back to him with blazing red cheeks. "I didn't say that!"

"Yeah you did!" Will pointed at her cheekily, "well if you told El I was bound to find out eventually."

"You didn't know already? Shit." Max leaned down with her head between her legs and groaned as Will chuckled good-naturedly. "I

won't say anything of course..."

"Tell me who you're crushing on. El said something about Jennifer Hayes once, the girl who sometimes talks to you at school. Is it her?"

Max had observed a number of girls talking to the group of nerds, specifically Will. He was still whispered about all down the corridors, 'the boy who came back to life', 'ghost-boy', among some other more nasty nicknames that made her glare at them in annoyance. They mostly came to say they'd missed him, where did he go when he went missing (she'd read the newspaper articles but had yet to ask them about it), would he draw them something. He always answered and agreed politely.

"It's not her... anymore." Will stated with a shrug. "I don't like anyone right now."

"Damnit. Fine Byers, but you better tell me as soon as you do so we'll be on even terms."

"Fine." Will replied, rolling his eyes as Lucas finally came back out to join them.

...

They all rode to the Byers home together and were immediately greeted by a nervous-looking Joyce. "Hey kids, oh Max! It's nice to see you again."

"Hi Ms Byers." Max said, looking around the quiet living room save for the gruff Benny who came to sniff at them all and spotting the police-chief in the sitting-room. "Who're you?"

"It's the police-chief, Max." Joyce replied, grabbing her shoulder as the big man approached them slowly. "Hi Max. My name's Hopper, you're new to Hawkins?"

"Sort of. How'd you know?" Max asked in confusion. Hopper cracked a tired grin, "everyone in Hawkins knows eachother after a long enough time. Anyway, I'll be heading off."

"Bye chief. Thanks for bringing her back in one piece." Those words

were half mumbled and only meant for the police chief's ears, but Max picked it up as well and stared at them with a raised eyebrow. Were they talking about El?

The boys had already left down the hallway and she followed suit, with Benny the dog at her heels. El's bedroom door was ajar, and when Will pushed it open he found her sitting on her bed looking tired and washed out, the underside of her nose rubbed raw. "El? You okay?" Mike was the first to ask, crouching down in front of her. El nodded, standing up but immediately sitting down again as she felt the blood rush to her head. "You look tired." Max stated, brushing the hair from the side of her face as El looked up to her with a wan smile. "What happened?"

"The bad men?" Will answered questioningly, causing the other boys to look at her in horror. "Are they here?" "Did you kill them?" "Are they trying to take you away?"

"No. Not like that... please, I'm just... hungry." Was all El could state in reply, grabbing Mike's hand to pull her up and lead her to the dining-room. The nervous look on Joyce's face was explained immediately as she closed her eyes tightly and grabbed her daughter in a sorrowful embrace. "I'm sorry you have to do all that honey. Was it too scary?"

"No. Just... drained." She'd reverted back to her simple speech and was now looking longingly at the toaster where her eggos were cooking. "Right, let's get you something to eat, you kids as well. Might as well feed the dog too."

"Mom, what happened to El? What did the bad men do to her?" Will asked in as demanding a tone as he could make, squaring up to his mother. Joyce shook her head and replied "only what she had to. To keep her with us, you understand?"

Nobody understood, especially Max. But they all sat at the dinner table anyways and ate home-made sandwiches to make El feel less uncomfortable, while she steadily chewed down her preferred eggo waffles. "Maybe you should stay home instead?" Joyce suggested, only to receive a vehement head-shake from the girl, who seemed much more awake. "I'm fine now, was just... hungry." she insisted,

holding her plate up. "Two more?"

And that was how they left the Byers home, this time in Joyce's car (illegally) with the four boys piled in the back, the two girls squished together in the front, and a bark of farewell from Benny on their way to the Hendersons

...

Jonathan and Nancy were out on the town in a rare moment of wanting to do normal couple things. Well, actually they'd run out of bullets and money for gas to get as far out of Hawkins as they'd like to, and had settled for window-shopping and maybe getting cheap food. Holding hands as they walked in the quiet evening. Just as the sun set they saw a bright green minivan pull up next to Jonathan's car and out came the kids they knew, their little brothers and sister included.

"Jonathan!" "Nancy!" "Oooohh they're on a date!"

"You heading to the movies?" Jonathan asked after rolling his eyes and pulling Nancy closer to him. "Yup, just came from the comic-book store and arcade." Dustin declared proudly, showing the bags and toys he'd won as proof. "It's his birthday. French toast?" El whispered in Jonathan's ear, nonsensical to Nancy who'd also heard but it made the teenaged boy chuckle. "He got brownies, remember?"

"C'mon kids, movie starts in 20 minutes." Mr Henderson called from the driver's side of the car, shepherding the kids along with a bored (nonetheless content at his son's happiness) expression on his face. He nodded at the teenagers, who waved back and greeted him politely, before they parted ways. An unfamiliar girl had stepped out of the van behind Lucas, eyed Nancy wearily, leaving herself as the next topic of conversation. "Who was that girl?"

"Max? Their new friend, her family moved into Old man Stample's house." The decrepit man had passed away five years ago, leaving a rat-infested home with rotten floorboards to be fixed up by the government. "Oh. Well, she seems... tough."

"Wait til you meet her properly. She tried to crush my hand when we

shook."

...

Dustin sighed as he nursed the giant cherry soda in his hands and dove into the large popcorn he shared with Will. On his right was Lucas, who was also just as into the movie as the other guys and sharing with Mike, who seemed a little distracted even with the awesomeness of Egon and Venkman and phantoms and slimers playing across the screen. He kept glancing at the back of El's head, who was watching the movie leant against Max with a soft smile. Sitting between his now-sleeping father and the telekinetic girl, she seemed to be the only one genuinely as excited as him, Will and Lucas.

"Isn't this great?" he whispered during the intermediary break as they paused the movie for 10 minutes to allow people to get up and go to the bathroom. "It is great. But why don't we move down a row? Nobody's using those seats..." Mike suggested, grinning when they all shrugged and made to move as he clambered to the seat in front of and two to the left of him, right next to El of course.

"Could he be any more obvious?" Lucas asked as he shook his head. "Who cares, whatever makes him happy. I'll share with him and you eat mine and Will's popcorn..." Dustin said, taking the seat beside Mike with Will and Lucas finishing off the rearrangement.

Dustin was filled to max-capacity with popcorn and soda, but still had room for desert. Smarties and popping candy filled his mouth at the same time, making an odd combination of chocolate fizz that he enjoyed.

The movie ended but the buzz of excitement emanating from the boys and Max permeated the air. El was still sleepy, as was Mr Henderson. She clutched Mike's hand who was off with the other kids on a million tangents about ghostly people and how maybe their lunch lady was a spirit too. "She's as evil as one for sure..." Dustin agreed.

...

"Did you have fun El?" Mike asked her as they chose to sit next to each other in the back of the minivan. She nodded at him, eyes sparkling off the moonlight that shone through the windows. "I like movies."

"Me too. Do you think maybe... some time we could, go?" Mike asked hesitantly, nerves going down as she nodded enthusiastically. "Again? Like we did now?"

"Yes. But just... you, and me. No other friends."

"Like a date?" El asked, and he swallowed his fears again before nodding silently. She didn't reply with words, instead leaning forward and kissing his cheek in the shroud of shadows cloaking them from the other kid's sight. "When?"

"This weekend." he replied, feeling weak as he reached his hand up to touch the spot she'd kissed.

"Venkman was an asshole!" "A funny asshole..." "Ugh! I'm slimed" "Great! Actual interaction!" Thrown out opinions and botched movie quotes brought the two back from their own little world and they joined in on the fun.

...

Dustin stared out of his open window with a content smile on his face. Seeing Troy get beat up followed by going to his favorite places with all his favourite people. And then coming home to a birthday cake his mom made and promised he could eat for breakfast. Yup... today was perfect.

...

Max stared out of her open window, ignoring the draft with a grimace on her face. Her mother immediately threw her down as soon as she walked through the back door, condemning her with a shrieking prayer of forgiveness to the lord and smacking her now-aching ear when she'd tried to get back up while Carrie silently watched in the background.

She shook her head at the step forward Carrie wanted to make,

looking between the she-witch and her sister with growing anger. As her mother left the room, left her crumpled in a heap on the ground, Carrie walked right up to her sister before crouching down in front of her.

"I could kill her now."

The words sent a chill down Max's spine and she tugged the younger girl forward, into her waiting arms. "Don't say things like that Care. I mean... yeah,she's a bitch. But she's our mom."

"You feel something for her still?" Carrie asked incredulously, her whispery voice raising to an inaudible pitch. Max couldn't help but guiltily recall the times when her mother was nicer and less crazy, before their dad died and Carrie was a baby. Back when they hadn't fallen into hard times.

"Not really. I just want to make sure she's alive for now. If she dies, bad men will seperate us into different families. They'll find out you're special, and try to use you."

"What if I don't let them?" Carrie suggested, fists clenching. Max shook her head, dragging her sister into the bedroom and her own bed. "There's this friend I have, you saw her on Sunday, El. She grew up in a lab with the bad men, because she's like you..."

At the end of the story Carrie was in tears, crying because it ended happily and curling up by her sister, touching the purplish bruise on her jaw, right below her left ear. "She isn't meant to hurt you." Carrie whispered mournfully.

"It's okay Care." Max mumbled back, eyes drooping. "Today was perfect..."

...

Author's notes:

Another somewhat filler chapter. For Dustin mostly. Little bit of what El had to go through in the lab (more detail on that later). I think the next chapter(s) should be Will-centric?

25. Chapter 25

...

Thursday 18th July, 1984

...

The upside-down hadn't changed much since he'd last been there, over a month ago now. Still too foggy to see past ten feet in front of him, eternal twilight, the same greenish gas with tiny nuclear flecks permeating the atmosphere of a desolate wasteland, its layout a reflection of home.

He avoided the curtains of creeping ivy and long vines that twisted over all the things it shouldn't in his house, which was... well, everything. Skipped the rotten backdoor steps and landed in mould pretending to be grass. Then it was a straight-shot through the sparse forest of endlessly tall tree silhouettes and haunting echoes, which he'd come to realise were the thoughts he could infiltrate, thinning the barrier between the worlds to reach him.

Will was on a mission. This world had once been his prison, it's inhabitants his captor, until he turned the tables and learned to face his fears. Now it was a weapon, a tool to be used against those who threatened the lives of his friends and family. The once-useless boy who'd only ever been able to get himself lost would lose himself now to find what he needed to help them.

He'd already been through Hawkins Lab on multiple journeys and come up empty. Wherever the new base was, it was far from the town, undetectable. Will clenched his jaw, fists curling as he thought about where they could be, what they could be taking his sister for.

El was blocking him out of her thoughts. He didn't know she could do that until earlier in that very same dream, when he remembered what happened and tried to prod her mind, and encountered the barriers. Invisible forces pushed him back, kept him out of her room. And as much as Will liked to go on about respecting people's privacy, Eleven... she was a special case.

He'd failed to reach her thought cloud, even in his lucid, most powerful form. Which led to the change in tactic, going out to Hawkins Lab for yet another hopeless investigation, which further led to him now walking through the forest aimlessly. Well, maybe not so aimless, there was after all still one more thing to check on...

Along the way Will hummed to himself, his favourite song by The Clash that had yet to become an overplayed annoyance. It took a long time, even though he could navigate through this familiar patch of woods leading to the railroad tracks with his eyes closed. "One days it's fine and next it's black..."

"So if you want me off my back." He'd made it to the junkyard, and in the distance stood the creepy old house from one of his many different nightmares, painted black and menacing. Inside that house were the thought clouds of his friend, his enemy and the unknown. Enemy because Max's mom had hurt her, his friend. Friend because she knew what it was like to be an outsider, but was nice to them, and reached back when they (well, mostly Mike) extended the hand of friendship.

Mike excelled at that, trusting the right people, seeing the good in them. He had a gut instinct that was almost always on point, and a moral compass that never strayed far from true. He also had the most initiative, always coming up with new ideas, though they'd never get far without his friends to sort out the details for him. His natural charisma drew the other boys like moths to a flame, his speeches inspiring enough to keep their bonds tight. He was the glue.

Dustin was best at working out those details, explaining the far-out concepts to the others. He was their brainstormer, the most clear-headed and logical, when he backed up Mike's hair-brained schemes with the facts it swayed the rest of the party. But he was also the mediator, the peace-keeper in the group.

Then there was Lucas, the most grounded, most likely to think in the box and work with the facts and reality he had in front of him, which in all fairness kept them, or got them, out of danger plenty of times. But he was a loyal friend, a powerful ally, and with him they overcame the odds. He would fight for them, no matter what, because he was their guardian.

So what was Will? Well, the damaged one. The one to protect. Now, probably the sneakiest. Lying, cheating, doing what he could to maintain his sense of normalcy. He once thought himself to be the wisest, but all the good that wisdom did when he was trapped in the upside down for that harrowing week, only to be rescued by his mother and the police chief. He wasn't wise then...

He honestly didn't know what he was, what he brought to the group. But maybe... maybe this unknown, whose thought cloud was a fluctuating mess of violent, swirling particles, could help him understand.

Will sat on the floor where a bed would have been, judging by the two thought clouds hovering next to him. Usually the mist moved to him, but this cloud seemed stagnant, unwilling to comply to his wishes. Sighing, he ignored the more peaceful looking cloud whose echoes sounded too familiar for him to want to enter (Max, thinking about who knows what, he wasn't too interested at that moment) and moved closer towards the other. He submerged himself fully in the violently swirling mist, opening his senses to the memories that drifted inside him.

First there was a white chapel, a woman standing outside it with a crying bundle of blankets and another child leaned against her shoulder. The woman was screaming at the door of the chapel with tears in her eyes...

Flashes of blood, shower water running, screaming uncontrollably, laughing, jeering...

Then there was a bare apartment with peeling wallpaper and cold floors. Two tiny girls with blondeish, reddish hair and pale skin in white church dresses plopped in the middle of the room while the sound of a woman's distant crying in another room could be heard. They were giggling together, Will recognised them as Max and Carrie before the scene faded to something more recent...

A prom, hundreds of well-lit faces all smiling towards him, more laughter, tears of happiness and a prince leading him through the crowd...

Maybe a year or two ago. The same apartment though a bit less barren, a mother on the verge of a breakdown while her oldest daughter screamed in her ear, the start of her tomboyish fashion sense already in place. The younger daughter (not by much, obviously) watching silently, intently...

His acceptance speech cut off by gasps from above. A shower of blood raining down upon him, the bucket hits his prince, killing him. Stunned silence. And then... more laughter.

And cut to the latest scene, where a most recent version of Carrie continues to watch the maniacal mother strike back at the yelling daughter...

Death. Death and Blood and Fire and Destruction. How he longed for this day...

The youngest daughter walked away from the scene, down the hallway and opened the backdoor of the house to the open yard. Will followed her, still gasping in shock at the sudden flashes that strayed far from the events he knew and understood were this girl's life, what the hell were they?

He was unsure of the outcome of this excursion, but staying inside a moment longer would be too much for him with the screams of the mother hitting her daughter still ringing in his ears. She stopped in the middle of the yard, about 15 feet away from him on ground overgrown with black weeds, dead and swampy looking. The greenish mist had returned, obscuring her in her old fashioned white nightgown with the full sleeves and lace trim even further.

"Why are you here?"

The ghostly echo of such a tiny voice shouldn't have been audible to him, yet he could still hear. Will made to move forward in reply, but he couldn't, his limbs were frozen in place as she asked again. "You've seen it all. Now. Why are you here?"

"Carrie. I'm Will, Max's friend. Wait! Please don't..." he pleaded, wheezing at the invisible hand that suddenly constricted around his windpipe. She turned to him as he rose a few feet in the air, then

pulled him forward. He was right in front of her, his toes skimming the grass just enough that he wasn't hanging with a broken neck. He stared down at the cold face of fury before him, terrified.

"I... I needed... to see, if you... were... a threat."

There. The cold, honest truth laid bare before her at the hint of questioning (ignoring the general disdain) she held for this intruder in her personal territory. Carrie continued to screw her face up in anger, just barely relaxing it enough that she could see past the red in her eyes and focus on him. The boy was smaller than his friends, almost her height, and she knew she was small for being 11, almost 12 years old. "I hate you."

She released him, watched as he crumbled to the floor in a wheezing pile of tangled limbs over small torso, wet hair plastered to his forehead and cheeks and hugging himself, massaging his bruised neck. It took a while before he could face her again, but she patiently watched, maybe taking a little pleasure in this intruder's fatigue

"How can you... hate someone... you barely know?" he asked, forehead wrinkling in confusion as he took one last deep breath and propped himself up slowly by one knee, hiding the relief that somehow he'd managed to avoid being killed... for now.

He stood hunched over in front of her, matching her stare, with watery eyes, but where every other boy (and man) he knew would crumble. All the girls in his life were very good at staring, glaring, puppy-dog, maniacal glints. He'd seen these eyes, the death-threatening ones, before in El, though never before had they been directed at him, and met them head-on.

"If they enter my mind uninvited. I hate them." She replied, simpering at the unflinching gaze whose colour almost matched hers (almost as creepy, less bug-eyed and more shadowy). "Max would kill me if I killed you."

Will cracked a tiny smile, even at the dead-pan expression of the girl before him. "So I get to live then."

"I didn't say that."

Carrie threw him to the side with a flick of her wrist and turned to face him again as he moaned on the ground in pain. "Why?" he asked, a tear slipping as he inspected the bruise on his chin. "You entered my mind uninvited." Carrie replied through clenched teeth, as if it was obvious, "Fuck you!"

"I'm sorry." he replied, staying on the ground this time as she shook in anger. "If I ever catch you in my house again, I'll rip your head off..."

It was momentary, but he thought he saw something, just before she turned away. A flicker, unfamiliar features appearing on her face. Death and decay and all black eyes like shiny marbles, face opening up like flower petals. Shutting his eyes, he listened to the sloppy noise of her footsteps treading across muddy ground, before the creak of the door opening indicated her leaving.

"It was nice to meet you." he mentally slapped himself at the stupidity of said comment, while his hand shot up of its own accord in farewell and his eyes opened and saw the back of her head, bright blonde, and the trail of her long, white gown.

She pointedly ignored it.

"I hope those memories drive you crazy. Now fuck off..." Will frowned as the door shut behind her and the house immediately sunk into the earth, swallowed by the decaying filth beneath his shoes until there was only another patch of swamp in site.

He'd come for answers and only managed to find more questions, and more trauma, not that he wasn't familiar with the latter. These secrets the girl had given him were like the back-tale to an epic side-quest she was central to. What were those intermittent flashes from? Surely not from her...

Shaking his head, Will decided that tonight he'd had about enough of exploring the upside down. If he didn't get any real sleep he'd be exhausted for school tomorrow.

...

Wide eyes blinked open, staring up into the early morning light as she took in her surroundings. She was in Max's room, under her covers while the body of her sister had sunk to the freezing floor (luckily she slept in hooded jerseys and sweats).

Her thoughts immediately turned to the dream she'd had last night. The boy, Will, had been there. The details were a little hazy, but she remembered feeling immense anger at him for some reason. She wasn't clear on what else happened though...

Carrie tiptoed into the kitchen, looking around. There was no breakfast started of plain unsweetened watery oats, no sign of her mother passed out there, or in the living room. She shrugged and started breakfast herself, happy to have some more alone-time to think about exactly what that strange dream could mean.

Max entered and sat down, smacking her hands in glee when she saw the real butter being bought out for toast and actual milk in their oatmeal. Carrie left her to check the bedroom, noting finally that her mother was passed out on the floor of her own bedroom. In her hand was an empty bottle of something strong smelling, maybe gin.

"Mommy..." she thought with a shaking head as she discarded the bottle and left her there. Breakfast done, she left the dishes in the sink and followed Max around the house, watching her look for clean clothes to layer on and a stray cap to toss over her messy bedhead of red curls. "Mom drank last night. A whole bottle..." Carrie stated, on their way to the front door.

"She'll be out for the whole day." Max grinned gleefully. "I can take you outside!"

The younger girl shook her head, nervously eyeing the outside lawn before them that might swallow her up like it did in her dreams. Going outside so far the other day had been a last ditch effort to find her sister. This was a different idea she proposed, one far more dangerous. "No Max, I don't..."

"Yes you do!" Max insisted, grabbing her wrist and pulling her forward to stand at the front step. "You'll see, it'll be great. You can meet my friends, and especially El and Will. We can get ice-cream,

you remember that?"

Ice-cream. She liked ice-cream, though the times Max managed to sneak it to her she could count on her fingers. But would it be a good idea to see Will? What if she got angry and her gift came out? "Max, I'm still not..."

"Pleeeeeeasssee Care! Do it for me, pretty please. I'll read to you, two books, no three! Tonight, anything you like! I'll do your chores for you even..."

"I... I guess, okay." She couldn't resist the promise of stories that she still couldn't read, because her mother didn't think she needed to learn from anything other than the bible. And her sister's adorable pleading expression always wore her down.

"Great! 3:30 we'll be back and you won't regret it sis." A bike pulled up by the junkyard across the road, familiar in the last two weeks to the girls and Max hugged her and left with her backpack slung over one shoulder. "See you soon!"

"Bye!" she called back, weakly. Max grabbed the back of the bike with the dark-skinned boy riding it and they took off down the road, away from her line of sight. Outside wasn't a safe place, not that inside was either. Still, she thought she could brave it for Max.

...

All throughout the day at school they noticed something wasn't right with the quietest of their party. The shadows under his eyes were more prominent, he dug his nose deeper in his sketch pad and couldn't finish his lunch. Said girl was the first to call him out on it, as expected.

"Hey Wise-man, something up?" she asked with a questioning tone in front of all of them in the AV club-room. They were eating lunch here today, avoiding the mainstream crowds until the buzz of yesterday's events

died down.

He shook his head with a sigh of resignation. "Just... tired."

"Thinking of slimers?" she teased, shoving his shoulder and wiping the crumbs of his leftovers from her mouth. He hummed in reply, finally putting his book down and looking up at them. "Are you sure you're okay Will?" Mike asked in a much more careful tone, leaning forward to inspect his carefully constructed expression of tired boredom. "Yeah, like I said. Just... nightmares, normal ones."

"Okay." "Whatever you say buddy." "Speaking of, wasn't that like the best movie ever?"

Another conversation was immediately launched and Will rolled his eyes, catching the gaze of Max who was eyeing him thoughtfully. "What?"

"Nothing." she replied quickly. "Well, actually... after school I'm going home to pick up my sister Carrie. We're getting ice-cream, and I'm asking El to come. Maybe you could join us?"

"Hey, what about us?" Lucas asked indignantly, overhearing the quieter conversation. "What about you?" she retorted, scoffing. "We wanna go too, ice-cream's not exclusive!" Mike argued, "I love ice-cream, jeez you invite her to your birthday and get nothing in return..." Dustin shook his head as Max glared at them all. "Ughh, fine! It's just that Carrie isn't good around loud people, or crowds. And you three..." she indicated Lucas, Dustin and Mike, "qualify as loud."

"We can be quiet!" Mike exclaimed, then realising a little too late he cleared his throat and lowered his decibel level. "I mean..."

"Yeah yeah, just... try to cool your jets, Wheeler." Max rolled her eyes again, "you guys like travelling as a pack don't you?"

"Yeah, for safety. Too many assholes trying to pick on us outside of this room..." Lucas replied seriously, snarling slightly as he stared at the walls like he could see through them and out to said threats. The unspoken thoughts of monsters filled their minds, save for Max. "I suppose, I was a lone wolf in Chicago... never did me any harm."

"Chicago's lone wolf pup, never mess with her... awoooo!"

"Oh shut up!" Max smacked a laughing Lucas on the arm and immediately got a shove back. "You wanna go Sinclair?"

"Bring it White!" The fact that they were 13 years old pushed aside, a schoolyard-type brawl emerged with long-limbed arms flailing to get around heads and legs kicked out to trip each other up. Dustin stood in front of the delicate equipment to shield it while Mike and Will tried to tear them apart.

...

After school, they all made their way together to the White house (ironic, considering how grey it was) where the little girl that almost looked a ghost was waiting on the kerb, eyes shifting nervously in all directions before she spotted them.

"Is she still asleep?" Max asked, and upon the girl's nod cheered. "Good. Hey strong-man, let me ride your bike there and back and I'll relinquish all duties of you pulling me to school."

"What? I'm not walking!" Lucas replied indignantly making Carrie flinch at the yelling. Dustin punched him on the arm, "Just stand on her board and hold my bike to let her ride with her sister dude."

"Oh! Oh." Lucas spotted the scared looking Carrie (who really, he should've been more scared of) and nodded in consent. "Okay, take it. And no more pulling you to school."

"Unless you want..." Max teased, taking off with Carrie wrapped around her on Lucas's bike while said boy stood on her board on the back of Dustin's. The next stop was the Byers home, a good fifteen minute ride away.

"We need you to do that again 011."

She tried again, focusing all her energy on the lights in front of her, letting herself slip between photons and atoms and push, shove them away from each other. Words were flying between the scientist, strange words like quarks and electro-magnetic and hadron collision, words she'd only read about in passing in her science textbook but never understood. She was only ever doing great work said Papa, it'd

never mattered before.

"Whatever you're doing now, hold that there!" the scientist yelled through the speaker phone, while all around him other men seemed to be staring even more intently at her from the looking glass. She tried her best to hold it, but the power was growing in those tiny lights and she felt it was ready to burst at any moment now.

"Almost... almost... there! Let it go!" Eleven fell from her position in front of the concentrated beam of energy projected from a massive overhanging machine. She felt her hold release on the particles within said laser, which promptly shut off before it imploded and destroyed everything within a 10 kilometre radius.

From behind the glass she could hear clapping and cheering. Eleven turned her head, catching site of the scientists hugging and congratulating eachother. Her thick plastic suit was slick with perspiration on the inside and her protective headgear with the clear plastic front was foggy from heated breath. Blood leaked from both nostrils but she paid no mind to it as the metal door opened like a large jaw and in hurried Hopper, also fully suited.

"Eleven!" He grabbed her under the knees and arms and pulled her slight weight upwards. "Let's get you out of here, you've done enough today."

Eleven nodded, grabbing his neck as she let him carry her all the way to the changing room and helped her sit down and peel off the layers of the suit. He closed his eyes and handed her the dress and jacket she'd had to take off. "Those bastards, they didn't need to push you to do it twice."

"It's okay." El reassured him, now comfortably dressed with her socks and shoes tugged on. She tried to stand again, but it was like walking on a tightrope. She eventually settled for using Hopper's arm as a strong crutch. "It's not okay El! This is only the third visit you've made, not to mention yesterday they had you using your powers as well. They need to understand your limits."

'She's just a kid...' he thought, shaking his head in worry as they slowly walked to the control room, stopping on the way so he could

use his handkerchief to wipe her still profusely bleeding nose. "That took a lot out of you."

"It wasn't... bad." She released a shuddering breath, eyes shutting tight as she clung to his wrist. He carried her again, to the lab room where most of the scientists who'd been observing now were. Among them sat one in a wheelchair, half his face covered by a smooth metal mask and hands covered in surgical gloves.

"We're done Brenner. You've used up her power."

"We successfully contained the energy of an atomic collision within a single cell disc Hopper." Dr Brenner stated, turning to the grinning men with as much shared glee as he could muster. "We've done the work of gods."

"No." Hopper turned towards the trembling girl who stood behind him, clutching the side of his shirt. "She did."

"She did indeed." Brenner grinned at the scared girl. "Come on now Eleven, don't be afraid." The scarred wrist appeared as he extended his arm out to her. She refused, sinking deeper into Hopper's side as traumatic memories he was central to played out in her head one by one. Every part of her was twitching...

"Don't do this on me now El, come on..." Hopper grabbed her face and urged her to snap out of it, watched the dainty lashes fluttering as pupils moved rapidly beneath her closed lids.

Finally, her eyes opened again, focused on him. Hopper sighed in relief and marched them out of the room, away from the leering Brenner and other scientists, clutching her shoulders. "Take us back now." he ordered the assembled guards, who brought their blindfolds over and nodded in compliance.

...

They sat in the police truck outside of the tiny ice-cream parlour, the only one in Hawkins. Cigarette smoke wafted through the air before drifting out of the open window, the hand that was holding said cigarette shaking slightly. Hopper kept his gaze mostly out the

windshield, occasionally glancing in the mirror to catch her reflection. "You enjoying that, huh?"

It wasn't strawberry, the sweet pink that stuck to the top of her mouth and made her feel sick as thoughts of Benny the chef came to mind. Vanilla, plain and cold and smooth from the short work her tongue had made in turning it into a perfect globe over a wilting wafer cone. "It's good."

She wasn't tired anymore, her wan complexion slightly returned to normal and the twitching ceased after they left the unmarked vehicle belonging to the feds and got into theirs. "You feeling okay now?"

El made to nod, but instead turned her head at the distant voices calling her name. Her friends were coming. Among them was Carrie, clutching the back of Max's jacket in a vice-grip while they rode Lucas's bike, with said boy stood atop a skateboard, Max's skateboard, behind Dustin's bike. Mike was the first to reach the truck, pulling up beside them and sticking his head in worriedly. "El! You weren't at home and Ms Byers said you went to... to the lab, again."

"I'm fine Mike." El confirmed, carefully opening the door still clutching her ice-cream. The shakiness was gone from her limbs. Smiling, she pointed to the parlour and indicated they should all go in. "Get her home Wheeler!" Hopper called out behind the boy, running the engine and backing away, "I've got business to attend to."

"Y-yeah, will do Chief!" Mike watched the truck leave with half a smile, before turning back towards the girl who'd finished her cone and was in the midst of her very first brain-freeze. "Uh oh..."

Carrie had felt the glare on her the whole time she was with Max's friends, shuddering. They were sitting on a bench eating ice-cream, and even though the cold confection was refreshing in the heat of that summer afternoon she let it melt slowly over her hand, strawberry cream dripping down her fingers as she stared at it, too afraid to look across the bench and spot the pair of eyes that she just knew belonged to him and were on her.

Will. He was small, like her, and quiet, like her. His ice-cream was

gone and now he was bored, eyes boring into the crown of her head as she kept her head bowed. "Care?"

She turned to Max, who was too busy laughing with the boys and El to notice her until that moment. "Yes?"

"You okay? Your ice-cream's melting." Max took the cone from her and licked up the melting sides while she snapped out of her scared daze and wiped her hands on her jacket. "I don't want it, I don't like strawberry."

"More for me then." Max grinned at her, keeping the cone greedily as Carrie shrugged and finally braved a glance at the boy who sat across from him. He was talking animatedly, like he hadn't just been glaring at her the whole time before that. The collar of his turtle neck shirt shifted downwards and she thought she spotted a purple mark, like a bruise, on his pale neck. Strange, that and the nonchalant attitude was confusing to her, but she supposed there wasn't much more to it than that...

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Author's notes:

In light of some powerful things Will's actor Noah Schnapp said about his character on IG, I'm really on the fence about shipping Will. Even though this is fanfiction, I believe even stories made up by random internet people have the power to influence... unpaid authors lives matter too right? So I might leave any indication of whether Will likes boys or girls (both? neither?) totally up in the air... you'll see how. As usual, previous chapters may be edited to reflect this. I also changed Max's hair colour in light of the recent updates ;)

Character Development Character Development Character Development...

Do you ever let the story just... write itself? The thought train for Will's internal monologue, I'm not sure where that came from honestly.

...

26. Chapter 26

...

Sunday 21st July, 1984

...

That morning when he heard his bedroom door being knocked on, bright and early, Lucas groaned and turned over in bed, away from the doorway his little sister peeked through.

"What is it Jamie?" he eventually asked, grumbling as he sat up. "Mom says get up, we got church soon." With that she left her brother to clamber out of bed and immediately start tidying it before setting out his church suit.

Four hours later he could taste freedom, running from the chapel entrance and straight to his bike that he'd convinced his mom to bring in the back of the car.

"Lucas!" said mother called, reaching the boot and helping him tug it out. "I wan't you back home tonight for dinner okay? Don't stay at Mike's too long."

"Okay mom." Lucas waved off his mother and screwed his face up at his little sister and her church friends before taking off in the noon light.

"Any 6's?" "No" "No" Nope" "You're all meant to say, go fish."

Dustin rolled his eyes and picked up a card, before immediately dropping his hand with a sigh. "This blows, let's watch a movie until he gets here."

"DVD player's broken and Dad's watching his golf." Mike replied, handing over the queen El had just asked for. "And it won't be much longer." Will added, "can we play monopoly instead?"

"What is monopoly?" "No!" "Absolutely not."

"I'll explain it to you later, and why we'll never play for the sake of our friendship." Mike said to El, who smiled back unknowingly. "Well then, I guess we just-"

Careful but deliberately loud footsteps came downstairs and they all cheered as Lucas arrived with his signature smug look. "Yes yes I know, you missed me."

"Now we can start playing for real!" Dustin swept the cards off the table to land in a messy pile in the toy box while Will set up the board and pieces and Mike tended to his DM corner. "Yeah, but I'm only here for six hours." Lucas warned, still grinning though because despite how they'd done the same almost every other weekend, he was still surprised they waited for him.

...

"You can't have her today."

Jim glared the men down while they stared back at him blankly through dark shades. "We were told by Brenner that she needed to-"

"She doesn't need to do anything. Come back on Wednesday like we agreed." His dismissive wave before slamming his home door shut left the two men standing on the porch, awkwardly. It was almost noon now, unusual that they'd come during this time. Hopper shook his head, lighting a cigarette and peeking through the curtains to see if they were still across the road from his lot.

They were. Hopper decided he needed to leave the house. Being off work for the weekend hadn't been his idea, but Flo's.

A pack of cigarettes tucked into his flannel and several curse words later found him out the back door and on his way to god knows where, shimmied through the fence on the other side of the lot and heading into the woods. The unmarked car was a distant thought that drifted away in the slight breeze that picked up across his face as he trotted along, smoking up a storm.

In just under a half hour, he made it to the familiar patch of dry grass that was the Byers yard. The house itself was very quiet, not

unexpected when he knew Will would be at the Wheelers with Eleven and Jonathan's car was gone, probably with the Wheeler girl.

When Joyce heard the knocks from outside she wasn't expecting to find him, of all people, at her front door. "Jim? I... did you need something?"

She ushered the man inside, tugging her pyjama flannel down and immediately leaving to get a robe while he made himself comfortable at the dining room table with a freshly lit cigarette. "No. I just needed to... get away."

"Away from what? Aren't you on holiday right now?" she asked incredulously, returned with a few more layers and her hair not so all over the place.

"The feds. They're outside my house as we speak."

Dark expressions met each other, blue eyes on brown clashing as she took the offered cig and drew in a deep puff that burned her throat deliciously. "She's with the boys. Do I need to warn Karen?"

"You know they won't go after her directly." Jim bought his hand out to take his cigarette back when she pulled out her own, lighter ready and waiting in her front pocket. "I've just about had it with them, Hop."

"Me too, Joyce." This time as his eyes raised to meet hers, he caught something else behind those smoldering depths. Something he didn't think he'd ever see again in his lifetime. "Hey, Hop?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you ever regret what happened back then? In highschool."

Another long pause. She was asking him a question he couldn't really answer, one he didn't actually know the answer to. "Regret... us?" he asked, for clarification.

"Do you ever wish I'd chosen to stay in Hawkins, with you. Instead of dropping out and running off with Lon."

Blue eyes widened in surprise while hers dropped intensely. "In another world, my kids could have been yours too, your daughter mine..."

"Cut the bullshit Joyce!"

Hopper stood up angrily and headed for the front door again, only stopping when he felt the small but rough hands brush his neck and shoulder. "I'm sorry, I don't know where that came from..."

He turned back to find her with shining eyes, guilty expression pleading with him for forgiveness. "Don't go yet."

"Don't talk about her again. Our kids, they... don't dwell, on the past." he asked, begged her to change the subject as she led him back to the table with a cup of black coffee and immediately started up about El's schooling, her love of flowers and eggo waffles and pretty dresses and solving puzzles.

Lucas wasn't sure when their group dynamic had really started shifting so dramatically, but apparently he'd been the last to notice that two of his friends were now an unspoken pair, their bond made of a different kind of material than what he, Mike and the other boys shared.

Mike and El. El and Mike. They were two of a kind, they talked quietly together more than anyone else did and seemed to never stop staring into each other's eyes. It was gross, absolutely disgusting... but maybe he wouldn't mind, if his girlfriend beat up bullies for him, and played a badass elf character in dungeons and dragons with him.

And held his hand when a toy clown appeared onscreen as they were currently watching Poltergeist. The campaign was finished in four hours, leaving 2 to spare for them to watch a movie before he had to go home. They were in the living room together, Mike's dad having moved to the garage to do whatever dads did, tinkering with grown up versions of their toys and gadgets.

Mike was deathly afraid of clowns, he and Will found out when his parents hired one for his 7th birthday and it apparently traumatised him. He'd yet to admit it out loud, but Lucas knew that in 4th grade

when they first befriended Dustin, Mike was the least inclined to hang out with the newer kid because of his fluffy curls and huge grin.

Lucas himself was afraid of werewolves, and had collected enough silver things in random places in his room (coins, a belt buckle, random buttons and pins and a medal of his dad's from 'nam) that he'd be well prepared for a werewolf attack. Dustin feared zombies, to the point where he had a whole plan laid out in blueprints tucked safely in his wardrobe should the zombie apocalypse ever really occur.

And Will was most afraid of alien monsters, a fear only heightened by what happened last year. Actually, they were all afraid of monsters in general now. With the exception of Mike though, none of their fears were so ridiculous Lucas thought with a quiet chuckle as he watched a concerned El quell the boy seemingly glued to her arm.

"He's gone now Mike." Lucas stated with a cheshire grin, watching the pale boy peek out from behind his own hands and El's shoulder just as the clown doll wrapped its arm around Robbie's neck and pulled him under the bed. The boy yelled out and ducked back down again amidst more laughing. "Screw you Lucas! You're never picking the movie again."

"Aaah come on Mike, don't be such a baby." Dustin sided with Lucas, chuckling as well as stuffing his face with popcorn and candy. "I'm not being a baby! The fact that no-one else here finds that creepy is actually a real concern to me."

"Meh, the clown is just a toy inhabited by an evil spirit." Dustin stated, shrugging. Mike shook his head in disbelief, wondering how that possibly supported his argument that the clown doll wasn't so bad.

Beside Dustin on the two-seater, Will had fallen asleep and was curled up with his head on the armrest, having already seen the movie with his mom and brother last year. He'd only told them about the clown doll before it started, without easing Mike's worries of jump-scares by telling him where exactly it showed up. Mike, Lucas and El were on the three-man chair.

"Can we watch something else instead guys?" Mike asked, as the ground on screen turned into a graveyard of the undead and it was Dustin's turn to gulp audibly. "Hell no! It's almost finished dude." Lucas insisted, just as the phone started ringing and everyone turned towards it.

Mike left to answer, talking for a little while with a respectful tone before turning to the friend he liked least at the moment. "It's your mom, she says go home now."

Groaning, Lucas got up to talk to her as well. "Fine, stop the tape there for later. You win this time, Wheeler."

As they all prepared to go home, for Will and El wanted to make the trip before darkness came and Dustin didn't see the point of just him being there when he could go to his own family, Lucas watched from the corner of his eye as Mike stopped El from riding off with Will and they talked quietly by the brick wall. He'd just about rounded the corner when he saw them quickly kiss, and it made his face screw up in even more disgust.

"You look like you just saw a face sucker in action dude." Dustin stated off-handedly, eyeing the boy with a raised eyebrow. "Two, actually. Don't ask." Lucas replied, hiding his face as the couple rounded the corner, both faces bright red and grinning.

The two Byers kids weren't strangers to seeing their older brother with Nancy, looking happier than he ever had been his life (according to Will). What they were strangers to, though, was seeing them making out outside the house through foggy car windows. Both Will and El screwed their faces up. "Hey Jonathan!"

Said boy gasped and threw himself away from the girl, who turned towards the now grinning kids with a deer in the headlights expression. "Will! El! Umm..."

"Um." "Hi Nancy."

"Hey El!" Nancy grinned back at the half-smiling girl with sparkles in her eyes. "What were you doing?" the younger girl asked curiously, causing her pseudo older sister to blanch.

"We were... we were-" her stutter was cut off suddenly as Jonathan interrupted.

"We were saying goodbye. Nancy has to go home, and you two need to get inside. Now, go!" He shoved his arm towards the house, as seriously as he could be when it came to the kids his heart usually melted over.

Will rolled his eyes, pushing the bike and El forward with him. "Whatever, we're not 6 dude we know what you were really doing."

...

"Do you think they're in love? Over."

"What a stupid question! Over."

Lucas rolled his eyes, staring up at the ceiling of his bedroom and tossing his ratty old baseball high enough to tap the ceiling while his supercomm lay next to his head.

"Oh come on! It's a legit concern, their relationship affects the party dynamic right? Over."

Dustin paused from organising the trading cards in their designated box, waiting for the silence on the other end of the line to cease and his friend's voice to begin.

"I guess... you're kinda right. But you sound like a dumb girl who gossips too much. Over."

"I don't! I don't care about anyone's relationship outside of us. Over. And speaking of, aren't you and Max a thing now?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Lucas asked quickly, scrambling to sit up, outraged at the matter of fact tone of Dustin's voice. "Who thinks we're a 'thing'?"

"Me and Will." Dustin replied, and Lucas could hear his teasing smirk. "You two are always fighting, and that's what people do sometimes when they like eachother."

"Where did you learn that crap? Have you been reading your mom's trashy women's magazines again?" Lucas asked incredulously, still ignoring the heat in his cheeks and ears. "No, it's just a thing I heard dude."

"Well, stop hearing things 'dude'. Me and... Max, we aren't a thing." Lucas shook his head in denial, wanting to end the conversation quickly.

"Why? Is it coz Max is another 'dumb girl'?" Dustin furthered, now finished sorting his cards and clambering into his own bed. "Hell no! She's not dumb!" Lucas inwardly groaned to himself at the vehement expression of denial. "She's okay. Just... no. Over."

"Denial isn't just a river in Egypt~" Dustin sang, making the boy even angrier. "You're an asshole."

"I know, goodnight!" Dustin shut off his supercomm first, leaving the Sinclair boy to stew over the accusations on his own. "We are not a thing... are we?"

They hadn't talked about her at all that day, but she'd come up more than once in the back of the boy's mind. Mostly wondering what she was doing, or thinking that during the movie, no-one would've enjoyed teasing Mike alongside him more than her.

He didn't think that all girls were stupid, or a waste of time. At the forefront on the list of girls not stupid was his mom, who as a doctor did the most badass thing saving people's lives everyday, in his eyes. Next was El, total, absolute badass. Nancy had been a dumb girl for a while, when she'd been dating the douchebag Steve Harrington. Now she was cool.

And Max was high up on the list of girls that weren't dumb. And she was the kind of girl who'd beat up bullies for him, and played a badass half-orc warrior in dungeons and dragons, and maybe it wouldn't be so bad if he could hold her hand that was usually curled up in a fist, ready to punch his arm or knock some sense into Troy.

Lucas didn't think he'd mind too much at all, finding h

imself more than a little excited at the prospect of school and her face showing up tomorrow.

...

Tuesday 23rd July, 2014

...

He hadn't expected this, coming from the two teenagers he thought had somehow managed to keep themselves out of trouble in the last few months. How wrong, yet right, Hopper was...

"And this is the entrance, we couldn't reach it because they had cameras going everywhere." Nancy said, pointing towards the slightly raised patch of corn maize in the photo. "Does it seem right to you?"

He still couldn't believe it. Couldn't believe the fact that these kids, so close to being adults with adult responsibilities... but still, just kids. These kids had somehow started and completed their own investigation on Hawkins Light and Energy, gathered photographic (and some bagged sample) evidence of the old lab, pinpointed the location of the new lab and detected its cover and security measures, and taken photos of the comings and goings of the new lab all while remaining undercover.

"Are you two planning to get into investigative journalism?" he asked in reply to her concerns, which both she and Jonathan smiled at.

"It's... not out of the cards." the teenaged boy replied, sorting out the photos into their separate folders based on the date they were taken in the last two weeks. 'I can't decide whether or not to strangle them for being so reckless or to recruit them...' he thought, still shaking his head as he looked over the evidence some more.

"This... this is really, something." The reply sounded less than negative to the teenagers, who were now frowning at each other. "Is it any good? If we send it out to the media, they could blow this wide open!" Jonathan exclaimed.

"But for now, leverage right?" Nancy threw out, "in case they get too testy, with El."

Hopper simply nodded, still too stunned at seeing what mere teenagers had been able to accomplish, independently, to help the girl. When all he'd done was sit by idly and watch her get taken to experiment after fucking experiment.

Later, with the kids gone home, he reflected on the intrusive guilt he felt in his heart at failing yet another daughter. She had no one in her life to turn to, a new Papa. But she needed one, and he was more than willing to take his place. Maybe he shouldn't have dismissed Joyce's notion of El being theirs. Uncertainly would they come together for the young people's game of finding love in each other, but for El... Hopper thought he could risk trying his hand with the crazy kind of passion that was Joyce Byers, just one more time.

...

Author's notes:

It's been a little while. Hi!

Tried to be Lucas and Hopper centric here. I'm honestly not too happy with the chapter as is so it may change later, add some things, change the pace of others. Have a second update as well :)

...

27. Chapter 27

...

Thursday 1st August, 1984

...

"We've been at school the whole time doing this stupid extra credit, don't you think we deserve to take the last month off?"

The suggestion given out by Dustin led to them spending the last month of Summer out in the sun as wild and carefree as teenagers could be. While most kids left in the third week of June and came back in the third week of August, they'd been inside, studying as much as they could in preparation for the next year as seniors in middle school, then high school and then college.

Said boys weren't the most normal group of kids, where most wouldn't worry about much more than how they'd keep cool from the heat, these ones worried about how they'd manage to keep their group together forever and get into the same college. Which led to Mike and Lucas taking the highschool level Physics course during the summer break while Dustin and Will opted for Biology. Science was the air that filled their lungs and key to the lives they lived after all.

Unfortunately, Troy and his buddies, and a surprising number of other failing students, had been held back in summer school too. Most days the halls were so crowded in that period between June and July that it had felt like a normal school day.

But from today onwards, they would be outside, spending as much of their time as they could with each other for the few weeks of Summer they had left to enjoy.

"Last one there's a rotten egg!" Will cried, zipping past the line of kids who were making their way to the lake outside of Chief Hopper's house. "You're on Byers!" "Prepare to lose!" Lucas and Mike took off as well, leaving just El and Dustin to catch up with them.

"Hey, can't you use your powers to give me a speed-boost?" Dustin asked, miserably failing to pump his legs fast enough to catch them while they were going upslope. El simply nodded, smiling as she focused her powers on the new bike she'd been gifted from Hopper, in preparation of her first school day next month. She felt as light as air, her bike and body rising above Dustin's as the boy gasped in awe.

The aquamarine banana seated bike complete with its front wicker basket loaded with snacks and towel suddenly landed in front of the three boys ahead, causing them to cry out in alarm and skid to a halt.

"Hey! That's cheating!" Lucas called out, scowling alongside Will. "No time to think, just catch up so we can win!" Mike decided, immediately kicking his pedal to ride off again. El laughed as they were now going downhill, easing her bike through the narrow trails she knew better than all of them until she popped out on the other side of town. She yelled out in delight when she spotted her friend waiting on the curb, alongside Carrie who was wearing a pretty white sundress that matched her own buttercup yellow one. "Quick! We have a race."

"Race?" Max asked, looking back to the corner she'd just turned in from that was still quiet. "You must be winning by a mile. Get on Carrie."

The younger girl nodded, pulling her body over to hug the girl she now knew pretty well (and secretly adored). Max held on and El propelled them all forward, with a bit of help from Max pushing off the road.

When the boys arrived at the lakeside wharf, hot and sweaty, it was to find the girls relaxed under the shade of an umbrella Hopper had brought out for them, sipping pink lemonade apparently made by Joyce who was also there.

"Mom? How long have you been here?" Will asked in surprise, grabbing the offered drink gratefully. Joyce simply shrugged. "Since noon. I was visiting the chief."

Alarm bells immediately rang off in his head, especially at the looks his mom and the chief were sharing. He chose to simply ignore it,

watching Dustin sneak over to Mike who was sitting with the girls before pushing him off the edge of the wharf.

Mike gasped as the cold water chilled his body and soaked through his shirt he hadn't had the time to take off. "Dustin!"

"Just testing the water, is it too cold?" the boy grinned back cheekily in reply, that was until Mike came back out and grabbed him in a headlock. "I don't know, YOU tell ME!"

With a high-pitched, girlish squeal Dustin followed Mike unwillingly, and then the tug of war began between Will and Lucas as well. The girls chose the more dignified route of heading down to the sandy bank below the wharf and getting in gradually, while the adults quietly watched from the shade of Hopper's home.

...

"They finally spent some time outdoors huh?" Hopper commented, watching El squeal as Max pulled her further out and tried to teach her to float. Carrie giggled with her dress soaked at the bottom, knee deep in water. Mike and Lucas were racing across to the deeper side of the lake and Dustin and Will kept climbing up the wharf and jumping back off in various poses.

"I know, about time. They stress too much over things kids should never have to worry about." Joyce shook her head, running her hair back as she sipped the lemonade she had left. Her hand was quietly, unintrusively placed in his, while the both of them watched their kids.

They were trying, starting with dinner the other night she had free at his place, the time she hadn't mentioned to Jonathan wasn't just another workshift. Then she'd come to his workplace almost every other morning with baked goods (Karen's work, another detail she preferred to omit) for him. Whatever they'd made in just a week and a bit (ignoring the previous history that spanned more than half their lives) was good for both of them.

...

Will found himself at the bank, shivering as chilled water ran off his too long hair and down his pale back, huddled with red eyes and his knees close to his chest while the sun baked him slowly. He felt at peace in this moment, with his mom in view through the small window of the chief's his brother there too, having just arrived a few minutes ago with Nancy, playfighting with the girl in the water. With El and his friends strewn about the waterside or still swimming, ducked under the greenish lake like pale fish that darted in and out of vision.

With the girl who drew lazy patterns with a stick in the sand, her sandy white dress clinging to her legs as she crouched ahead with her back to him.

Carrie wasn't unfamiliar to the sensation of eyes on the back of her head. Over time, the short time they'd spent together in which she established he was no threat, she'd gained some semblance of self confidence.

Carrie stood up and moved to sit next to him, keeping a wide gap between them. "Do you hate me Will?"

"Huh?" said boy frowned, turning to face her after he'd flickered his gaze away to the water. "What made you think I hate you?"

In response she dropped her face into a deep stare, one that he recoiled from because it looked like El's face when she was using her powers. "You always look at me like this." she stated, turning her head up again with concern, her tiny voice picking up slightly.

"Do I?" He didn't know. Or maybe he did, but chose to ignore it. "I'm... sorry?"

"No you're not. But you will be..." the broken smile coming from her face was entirely out of the blue. She stood up again, this time heading towards her sister and his, floating in the water. "I had a dream once, where I kicked your ass."

That fragile voice had a hint of steel to it. Her broken grin wasn't so broken, turned to him instead with a hidden emotion he couldn't quite fathom.

There were many different ways people expressed their feelings to the object of affection in question. Some with direct adoration and holding hands and secret, fleeting kisses. Some with vehement denial and begrudging admittance to themselves and a thin facade of push and pull and wrestling because who cares if you're a girl. Some with secretive, grown up dates and a mature outlook on future plans that may or may not have fallen into place long before. Some with outright passion and vent up feelings of frustration and making out and touching until the windows of his '71 ford fogged up because the AC was shotty *or non-existent, I can't remember*.

And some with an absolute unrequite such as Carrie knew the boy behind him felt. Eyes that may stare at her more than was usual of an almost stranger of a girl. No matter the tug at her heart that drew her to him, like a moth to flame, she knew she would burn. She was attuned to emotion, could feel it potent in the love and affection shared across all the people here. But none, save for her sister, was directed towards her. She knew that whatever drew the boy to her, or was it her to him? Whatever, it wasn't what she maybe wished it could be, in the most secret recess of her heart overtake with shades of black and blood red.

...

Author's notes:

One and a half chapters for your viewing pleasure. :) Thank you so much for reading, special thank you to Val for being such a dedicated reviewer. You've all left the loveliest reviews so far, it really helps during the most stressful time of the year for me 3

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28. Chapter 28

Summer was about endless days of carefree fun with friends. School a distant memory shoved far into the back of his brain even when he surrounded himself in its contents, preferring to overlook textbooks in favour of fantasy novels as he researched diligently for the next campaign he'd be hosting come tomorrow at noon...

Summer was leaving the library and immediately heading for Lucas or Dustin's, depending on who'd woken and gone to the other's house first, and eating sugary cereal with milk by the box, the iron stomach of a growing boy digesting it without complaint as they watched late morning cartoons together and planned out their days.

Summer was teasing each other about girls being gross except for MAYBE certain ones. And maybe these certain girls would be joining them that afternoon, heading to Chief Hopper's house by the lake, or to the Byers home, or to Mike's basement or to the only ice-cream parlour and comic-book shop in the whole town.

Summer was meeting the Byers siblings at the agreed place and time, every other occasion two other girls present, and immediately starting a sugar-highed frenzy of loud conversations, talking over each other and light punches aimed for safe zones like arms, the games beginning before they set the rules and ending in even more chaos.

Amidst the happy cries and shouts of laughter in a summer of more friends than he'd had in his life, a lull would reach, and he'd pause for a second to meet the peacefully observant face of a girl between worlds, and he'd gulp while slipping his hand in hers to bring her safely back to their moment under the sun.

Summer was melting ice blocks and cherry stained mouths and the flush of a hotbox room full of children trying to finish a game of dungeons and dragons before they gave up to feel the chill of the lake water instead.

It was watching the sunset beneath the distant treeline with his hand in El's again, basking in the glory of another day well-spent and

wishing time could stand still for him, for all of them...

29. Chapter 29

Monday 3rd September, 1984

Summer was over. And while he yearned for a replay of the weeks before, life went on, bringing with it new and not so unpleasant changes. Like the sudden growth spurt that put him head and shoulders above Nancy, which he loved to lord over her (no matter how hard she could still kick his shins and return his jibes). Or the seniority that came with being in the top grade of middle school, bullies almost a distant past thanks to Max, especially now that they were honours students which meant even more time spent with Mr Clarke and less around Troy and his goons.

And the biggest change came about with his cute friend not official girlfriend due to start 8th grade, her first ever grade, with them. It was hard to tell who was bursting with anticipation more that morning, as he took in the cute denim overall skirt and pink leggings she had on, sweater folded neatly in her bike basket. She looked back at him every so often as her mom struggled to keep her attention, with Will listening in her place.

"I signed her up for all of your classes. Her lunch is in your bag. El, you'll only have a half day, just to get used to it. I'll pick you up at 1."

She hugged and kissed them both before turning away with teary eyes, into the waiting shoulder of Chief Hopper who stood silently by. "You'll keep an eye on her Will, or maybe she'll keep an eye on you huh?"

"We watch each other." El replied ahead of her brother, waving back at her pseudo father and mother as she mounted her bike to ride off with Will and Mike. "Love you sweetie." Joyce called, taking the time to kiss her daughter again before gently letting her ride off into the morning. "They grow up so fast..."

"Hell yeah!" Max yelled, immediately slinging an arm around the new girl and dragging her away from the indignant boys at the bike rack. "You've finally stepped up to the major leagues huh pipsqueak?"

"Come on Max! No need to give her a hard time." Mike said, trying to pull her off of the now frazzled girl to no avail. "Oh reelaax Wheeler, your girlfriend's fine."

"She's not-" "Your locker 239? That's 2 down from me, yippee~" Max loosened her grip and led the wide-eyed girl through the crowd, shoving her elbows into people's sides to get them out of the way and receiving glares in all direction. "Give it up Mike, El's a goner."

Lucas shook his head and grabbed the arm of a pleading Mike, while Will glared silently at the retreating redhead and Dustin was already busy at his own locker. "She makes my job a lot harder..." Will muttered, more to himself than the others.

"At least the other girls won't try to steal her away. Not to degrade our personal hell girl, but word on the street is any person caught with 'Mangy Max' is dubbed a social leper. Trixie and her posse have a hit on her..." the information conveyed to them by Dustin stopped all three boys from their tasks.

"Mangy Max? Those airheads didn't come up with that on their own..." Lucas claimed, eyeing the cheerleaders on the other side of the room a little more peeved than the others probably felt. "Who cares what Trixie thinks? Those girls are the female equivalent of the troy-bots anyways."

"I doubt she'd want to be bffs with them anyways, Max has been telling her about everyone we don't like since the day they met..." Will revealed after Mike's comment, recalling the occasional memory he'd once been able to swipe from the now impenetrable force that was her mind. No doubt, the boys all had faith in El to make the right choices as she navigated her way through the jungle that was middle school.

'What's with that cat on her shirt, is she like 8?'

'1975 called, they want their legwarmers back...'

'That haircut makes her look like a boy...'

'I bet her mom did it coz of head lice, probably from hanging around

Mangy Max...'

'Ewww! You're probably right Trix. Nadine's gonna flip when she hears...'

El felt her cheeks immediately flame and tears sprung to her eyes, but Max was just as quick to grab her shoulder and whisper "ignore those bitchy comments. Trixie doesn't have shit on us El, none of those girls are as pretty as you and it makes them jealous enough to start nasty rumours."

Their lockers were on the other side of the school, in a much quieter area save for the gossiping teens within earshot of them. The main hall was much more crowded, here, the students were sparse and left as quickly as they came to join their friends in the throes.

"Yes Max. Thanks..." El placed her bag in her bare locker, trying her best to occupy her mind with thoughts instead of how she'd personalise her locker the way her friends did, with pictures and a planner.

'I bet Mangy Max got her claws into more than one of them though. I bet she's totally a slut... well, between toothless and midnight. Frog-face and Fairy-boy are probably exclusive.'

The girls were joined by Troy and his gang, eyeing the redheaded girl across the hall from them boldly as her nostrils flared, hunched over her locker door with her fists curled. "Come again ass-wipe?!"

"I said, you're probably a slut. Mangy Max, oh wait... don't you go by Mangy Mary on the streets?" the crowd of almost twelve erupted into peals of howling laughter and cackling, just as Max stepped forward. "You're asking to get your balls pushed in again shit for brains!"

"I aint afraid to beat a girl, especially a beefcake like you White." Troy pushed past his friends cheering him on and walked up to meet her, fists raised and ready to strike...

But only to be frozen mid-air. Max tackled him to the ground in one foul swoop, revelling in the heavy thud as he fell flat on his back and stared up at her in disbelief. "What's the matter? Cat got your

tongue?"

"Hey, Troy? Get up man!" One of his cronies tried to get to his aid but immediately tripped onto his front, his leg mysteriously pulled out from under him. Just as quickly the entire group of teens screamed and yelped as they were all yanked into the air by the roots of their hair or the back of their jackets, as high as the ceiling would allow (barely eight feet) before dropping like ragdolls.

"Oh my god we're being haunted! Someone help!" One of the cheerleaders cried amidst terrified screams and scrambling limbs trying to get up and away from the unknown source of their troubles.

El wiped the blood from her nose, thin frame hidden behind the set of lockers her door was on the end of, relishing in the pain she'd caused the nasty kids. Max took advantage of the mayhem and confused scattering of the crowd to hide beside El, throwing her arms around the smaller girl's shoulders fully this time. "Welcome to the public middle-school system, we're going to knock those so-called kingkaks off their thrones one asshole at a time..."

Author's notes:

This story's undergoing the process of some extreme reconstruction. It seriously might end up being entirely different to your first read, but I'm keeping its most vital parts even through the chops and changes. If you see more chapters than before, it's just that I've broken up the little bits that I'd usually bunch up into one chapter.

Along with the reconstruction I'll say that I really should have broken this up into a series, but I'll just continue writing everything in one big story because meh. Series starting with Part 1: The Return and After of El Byers, then Part 2: Band of Misfits. There will be a part 3, definitely.

That's all for now :)

30. Chapter 30

A little disheartened upon learning that he'd only be sharing Homeroom and English with El, Mike sat quietly, darkly, listening to the wild story Max was telling and El was nodding along to. He kept up a crooked smirk for the latter girls sake...

"... and she grabs all those prisses by their luxurious tresses and yanks them up to within an inch of their scalp life! You should've been there Wheeler, it was brilliant..."

"We should've been there to stop the fight. You're just lucky Troy's too much of a wuss to rat you guys out, and none of the others could explain what happened."

"Don't be such a spoil-sport." Max pouted, shoving the glum boys arm.

"They were all in the wrong as well, in this case." Lucas justified, earning a grateful look from the tough girl.

"I agree. Eleven using her powers then was warranted." Dustin finalised, earning a side-hug from Max that he shrugged off easily.

They turned to Will, wearily eyeing them all and silent throughout the small debate. "If you're okay, and not in danger in any way... well, I guess it's alright."

"Great! Now, back to our class schedules..."

... and the shared English class was with Dustin and grumpy old Mr Fenby too. Even Lucas and Max got to see her more, the former sharing Chemistry and Math and the latter Chemistry and Art.

Mike relented that at least Will had one of them around all the time now, the way he and Dustin or Lucas and Max shared almost all the same classes. The sweet expression on the face of the girl before him as they sent her off too, convinced him that there were better things to think about anyhow.

A mere six hours later, El reflected on the passed day in a jumbled

array of emotions. Spanning from anger and sadness at the rumoured and proven viciousness of young teens, to a fluttering happiness at the permanent bright smiles on her friend's faces with her presence, particularly Mike's...

"So hun, how was your first day of school?" Joyce asked as they drove, having picked her up as soon as lunch ended. El shrugged, twisting the hem of her denim skirt.

"Some kids, mean. I like my... classes though. Teachers are... nice."

"I'm afraid mean kids are everywhere sweetie. You didn't get in any fights I hope?"

"No. I didn't fight..."

Joyce relaxed, turning back to the road with a softened expression. "That's good."

She'd been comfortable enough in the institution with Will a constant presence. The curious eyes on them, the social pariah status given...

El forced her focus on the teachers and ignored all the kids in the initial hours of her school career. None of them were worth her time anyway.

But that day was a scheduled Lab day as well. And that day, oblivious as she was, El wasn't going to realise the start of something truly, terrifyingly extraordinary happening until it was too late...

Author's notes:

Middle class of Hawkins Middle School 1984-85 student, Elle (El) Jane Byers.

She has all of her classes with Will. Math, English, World Geography, Chemistry, Biology and Art the first two terms. Math, English, History, Music, Physics, Phys Ed/Health the next two terms.

Part 1: The Return Of El (ch. 1 - 13)

Part 2: The Aftermath (ch. 14 - 17)

Part 3: Band Of Misfits (ch. 18 - 30)

Part 4: Extraordinary Things begins next chapter.

I took a break from writing. Back now, sorry if this is short but I'm just trying to get back into the groove.

31. Chapter 31

Wednesday 19th September, 1984

The whirring of the clay spindle in his ears, consistent as it was protean. The imbalance of slumped clay on one side left the whole structure teetering...

Will was struggling to focus on his current art project, a first. He'd been looking forward to playing with the new medium since the beginning of the school year, but today, his enthusiasm escaped him.

"Will, your proportions are off. Start again."

Ms Kartes watched as he unceremoniously squashed his half done bowl with a raised eyebrow. Her journey continued, passing the empty seat at Will's side with equal parts surprise and concern.

"And where is Elle?"

"She wasn't feeling well. Had to stay home today..." Will commented, taking his clay mound off the spindle and throwing it onto the small space he had.

Ms Kartes left the table he usually shared with two girls, only one of which was here, paused from her task of stabbing pencils into her doubled up mound of clay and reaching for a random pot of glitter.

"Somehow... you're making that work." Will muttered with a sigh, reluctantly admiring the monstrosity of construct.

"I always make it work. El had to go to the lab today, didn't she?" Max asked, voice lowered as she looked around the room with eyes changed bright and eager to weary.

"As far as I know..."

He managed to focus on his task long enough to produce a clay pot, not high quality but at least he hadn't wasted the product.

"Tell her I hope she gets better, won't you Will?"

"Sure Ms Kartes. I don't know if she'll come back by tomorrow..."

"Shame. Well, give her this to work on at home..."

The art teacher sent him out with a sealed package of the same greyish clay he'd been using, concern etched across her face at the sombre tone to the boy's demeanour.

In two years, she'd never seen him so unfocused in class before, save for the first day after he'd gotten back from... wherever, he'd gone.

They'd been instructed not to ask, by the police chief himself nonetheless. Ms Kartes herself was just glad to see her top student back, no matter the circumstances surrounding his disappearance and the crazy funeral event. To bury another boy, a John Doe, thought to be Will Byers...

"Can I come over?" Max asked, as she walked down the hallway with one of the four boys she'd grown quite a fondness for.

Will shrugged, "if you want. Jonathan's driving me so we're heading to the highschool..."

"Cool. His car is awesome, I'm getting one just like it when I can drive..."

A snort came from behind them as Lucas joined them from his locker. "You've taken down like five pedestrians with just your deck, White. I'd hate to see what you could do behind the wheel..."

"Can it Sinclair!" Max was about to punch his arm when another body shoved himself between them, slinging an arm around each of their necks. "Now now, you two lovebirds..."

"Ughhh gross!" "Ewwww Dustin, never in a million years!" Said boy chuckled as they finally made it to Mike, leaving the classroom he'd just vacated minutes ago.

"Can I come over?" he immediately asked Will, who once again shrugged. "Jonathan's driving me and Max is coming."

"I called shotgun." The sardonic grin on Max's face went unnoticed by

the equally concerned boys, as they found themselves transitioning to the highschool after bidding Dustin and Lucas on their bikes farewell.

The car ride was pleasant enough, as Max chatted with Jonathan on the specs of his car and ramped up the small crush she carried for him (unknown to all but El, as recently developed as it was).

But the Byers home was... quiet. Empty, and quiet. No note on the fridge from Joyce to warn of a last minute shift taken. The front door was unlocked, and the back door was ajar. Benny was barking at the edge of the forest, beckoning them, before heading out of sight. It gave chills up all of their spines as they immediately took off in a sprint to follow where the dog had gone.

"BENNY, HERE BOY!"

"MOM, ARE YOU OUT HERE?!"

When they reached the clearing, slightly winded, from a close proximity the golden shag of the Byers house pet could be seen. Matted with something brownish and smelling more of metal than earth...

"Holy shit, that's blood!" Max breathed, eyes widening and mouth dropping as she turned to the three boys.

"And a lot of it. Is he okay?" Mike asked, looking around for signs of predators uneasily.

Jonathan dropped to his beloved dog's side and checked him, but the whining canine seemed to move fine with little sign of injury. No, the blood wasn't his, at least...

Benny took off again and they followed, Will wheezing soon enough as he felt the sinking in his stomach and familiar but unknown feeling of immense pain and anguish.

As they travelled, the sound of crying became clearer, stifled tears of a woman in agony. Will couldn't swallow the lump in his throat as the faithful hound led them to where they were meant to go...

Into another clearing. One with a woman crumpled on the ground

clutching light blue rags soaked in blood.

The rags were remnant of part of a dress, Jonathan remembered folding it with the other clean laundry just last night. The same night, Will remembered seeing it laid on the back of the desk chair in his sister's room, ready for the next day. Mike remembered complimenting her in it, watching the blush that recently started appearing on her face deepen. Max remembered tugging on it as she tried to drag El out early that morning, unaware she'd be entirely absent from the school day...

"Mom, Mom!" Jonathan pulled her up with Will on her other arm. "What's happening? Where's... where's El?"

"She's... she's gone. They took her, I tried... Oh god, we need Hop!"

She took a deep, shuddering breath. The kids before her, less young and innocent than a year ago, all had the same expression of hard earned wisdom. From a different place, but Max somehow reflected the same emotions, as she immediately turned back.

"We need to figure out a plan of attack, those bastards aren't getting away with this!"

Beside her, Mike nodded vigorously, fists clenched and entire body shaking in anger.

Joyce dried her welling tears and took on the same face as the kids, and Jonathan. "First things first. We get Hop."

"What actually happened, Mom?" Will finally asked, when they reached home and she collapsed on the sofa with the three younger kids as Jonathan left to call the police station.

"She was taken, from right under my nose. Two men, masked and hooded... I didn't hear them come in... El was tired, too tired. She could barely move before Hop went back to work..."

"Benny caught your attention. And it looks like he managed to get at the kidnappers. Good boy." Will hugged the filthy dog before distracting himself with the task of finding a damp cloth for the blood. There was little else he could do.

Mike was in the corner, leg doing the little nervous jig it always did when something bothered him. Max had adopted the same ideals as Will and was currently raiding the fridge, they all needed to eat something eventually...

Three hours later, when the evening sun just about disappeared below the treeline, the familiar rumble of the chevy truck outside drew their attention. The two older and three youngers stumbled to the front porch, to be met with the grim face of the man with the answers...

"Before you ask, this wasn't Brenner and the lab. I checked the entire building... as far as I know, they're not the main suspects here."

"Then who could it be?" Mike queried, right at his side with dreaded anticipation. The weary sigh of a man who knew he couldn't keep government secrets when they concerned the girl, especially from this boy, sounded...

"In simple terms, they... we, suspect... Russian Spies. Someone who knows about her, her past... she's been working on ending this so-called Cold War for awhile now."

"So thats it, is it? Spies, not just everyday kidnappers who'd like to do god knows what to a young girl? When can we get her back is all I wanna know..."

Joyce let the tears streak down her face again as she shuddered, cursing the universe for its gall to take another of hers...

"When they send the ransom note. I want that blood too, Will. For DNA..."

Hopper left Joyce's side cold and empty as he got to work with sterile cotton swabs on the whining dog, halting Will's efforts to distract himself.

Max felt compelled to speak up now, as she looked around the room full of dread and cleared her throat. "Sorry... but I need a ride home, it's dark."

"I can... I'll take you." Jonathan stood up with his keys and dragged

Will with him. "You too Mike."

"But-" the boy immediately tried to rebel, only to be silenced by a single shake of Joyce's head.

"It's late kid, your mom'll probably be worried sick..." Hopper relented, shaking his head as well.

Reluctantly, Mike followed them out, but not before pausing at the doorway.

"If you hear anything else, like... the ransom note..."

"You'll be the first to know." Joyce promised, not Chief Hopper, which reassured him more so.

The night sky rose as empty as the certainty in his mind that she'd be back in no time reared high. His supercomm turned on for all night at his bedside.

Mike, Will, Jonathan and Max, a hastily informed by radiowave Lucas and then Dustin, and an eavesdropping Nancy all went to sleep believing in her ability to make her way back to them, for the extraordinary to happen...

Author's notes:

Extraordinary Things Chapter 1. Hey! I've not abandoned this story, sorry for the long break. Just to let you know, updates may not be coming as frequent as they used to thanks to a broken laptop in for repairs leaving me to write out chapters on my phone.

If you're reading this now, thank you :)

32. Chapter 32

Preparations were underway that very night for a search party, consisting of as many agents from Brenner's lab as could be mustered in the interest of finding their most valuable yet underappreciated asset.

And of course Hopper and Joyce centred the party. Unwilling submission by the teens to stay out of the hunt, of course, led to their rebellion.

But when the radio caught nothing but static, Jonathan and Nancy were fast running out of places to sneak in or around for clues, no sightings or reports of eggo thieves came about in the next 48 hours...

And Will's trick of reading her mind fell flat. The prospect dawned on them that perhaps some of the wilder theories popping into their heads weren't so far out the realm of possibility.

Russian spies? Who knew for sure? Maybe Hop was double crossing them and giving up El to be subjected to endless lab experiments. Maybe she'd been taken deeper into the upside down, or even another dimension entirely, like last time.

Whatever the case, a sense of helplessness overcame them all. For, once again, their ability to rescue El was entirely subject to her beck and call, further dependent on her whim. Which was a tricky thing to place, for El to reach out to him, Will, who knew what would or could happen until then...

The Upside Down had changed...

Green smoke cleared and the air no longer choked his lungs as he trailed the narrow pathway uncovered by gnarled plant roots and wet sludge. His view distance was strong, unhingingly far.

The world felt still, incredibly so, where death and decay once writhed in agony beneath his feet there was now an eery peacefulness to his surroundings.

Torture turned to peace. Or maybe, the environment was just holding its breath and simply waiting. For what though, Will couldn't hazard a simple guess even...

Well, he could offer a unit. Maybe his inevitable death at the hands of a monstrous power in pint-sized human girl form. No, not El...

The drab looking house drowning in soupy swamp was still the same as ever. Will wasted no time in squelching across the landscape and thumping his palm against the door. With barely a second thought he forced the front door open and stepped inside, right into the waiting body on the other side.

"I thought I said-what-?!"

Right into the little girl on the other side of the door. Will sat up quickly, pushing off the ground away from her. "Carrie!"

"Will. Back so soon?"

Sharp teeth bared and light eyes huge and maniacal, set against the unusually pale face of the youngest White girl.

Will nodded solemnly, not one to beat around the bush with such a serious matter at hand. "Eleven's been kidnapped."

"I was informed by Max." Carrie stood up properly, smoothing out her white dress so it lay down flat again.

"And... I need your help."

"Me? Whatever for?" A single, raised faint eyebrow from the girl as she stared at him incredulously. "Can you not simply read her thoughts to track her location, as per usual?"

Will shook his head, sighing. "It's not that simple anymore..."

By then they'd moved to the back door. At the bottom of a familiar stone step was a white bench which Carrie sat on, waving at the space beside her for Will. "Tell me more..."

"She, El, before I could find her so easily... but now..."

"Now you cannot." Carrie deadpanned, "why?"

"She basically has a shield. A blocker, against outside forces. Like you do." Will watched as both eyebrows raised above her hairline with surprise.

"So what... you want to figure out how to get past that barrier? Or you want ME to?"

"It can't be that different from what you can do. I've felt it before, your power..."

Carrie sighed, a hand under her chin as she gazed off into the distance. Instead of answering his question directly, she changed tactics. "Do you remember, last time you came to visit. What I said?"

"You threatened to rip my head off if I ever returned. I assumed we were now on friendly enough terms for you to retract that statement."

"We'll never be on friendly enough terms for you to invade my mind as you please, Byers. This one time I allow as an exception."

She turned to him, eyes glancing up and down at the boy who'd only just recently started growing, stretching upwards the way the other three boys and even El did, to a point. "That's... something, I guess. So I just need you to show me how your powers work to-" "A moment. You expect me to give you the secret to mind invasion?"

What followed was an intense standoff. Well, as intense as two children with little more than fierce glares in their arsenal. Under strict orders by her older sister, whos wishes she really never could deny, Carrie wasn't about to submit one of her best friends to her hearts torturous desire.

But neither would she make this easy for him...

33. Chapter 33

Drip... drip... drip...

She woke up to the sound of water, the feel and smell of damp and the endless black surrounding her once again.

Eleven blinked, once, twice. Each attempt thwarted by a second glance on either side confirming her surroundings. For the few times she'd been there, the inbetween was second home in its familiarity...

She stood up. Dragging ripples across the black marble floor. El moved without intent, waiting for something, anything, to present itself.

And it did... eventually. A tall structure came into being before her very eyes, made of three brick walls of dull grey and covered in slime. The fourth wall, which she saw through, had a row of rusted iron bars.

And nestled in the centre against the far back wall was the huddled form of someone, black pouch over their head. El stepped up to the bars and reached one hand out. The shivering figure had her ankles and hands tied, pale skin mottled with cuts and bruises, grime covering her knees and the ripped hem of her dress.

El gulped, taking a step back. The little girl inside her cage was crying, her sobs reaching out like those of a dying baby bird as she struggled against the bindings.

"Vstavay!"

The voice echoed from all around her. The hooded figure looked forward and El turned with her, unsure of anything.

"Yarov, get her up now!" A different voice echoed, further off. The accent was thick and harsh, unfamiliar to her...

The girl in her cage was shoved around by an invisible force, and all of a sudden she felt the breath leave her stomach and an aching on her right arm that now felt broken. She closed her eyes tight, curling

up into a ball and willing the feel of cold stone against her back and the incessant thud of a thick soled boot in her thigh.

"Dimitri, sheez up!"

There were four men in total. All in drab forest coloured clothing with dark mud caked over their faces, firearms across their backs and cradled in their arms. One stared out the window, cleaning the pipe of his stolen M24 sniper rifle and reloading it carefully. Another had his own gun trained on the little girl who was just beginning to stir, far back in the corner of the little hut they'd been holed up in for the last two days.

The last two, their leader and second, were intent on interviewing the mysterious girl. Dimitri returned from outside as Yarov propped up the still blinded, still unknowing little girl. She was weakened considerably by the blows and unsure of anything at that point...

El whimpered, pushing against the restraints to no avail and suffocating under the black weight of cloth. The two men leered over her. In heavily botched russian, the two men began conversing:

"Teper my stara yemsysa? Ili my dolzhny podozhdat..."

(Do we try now? Or wait for the pickup...)

Dimitri shrugged, thinking back to the battle he'd faced earlier grabbing her in the first place. The bleeding thigh and calf now heavily gauzed attested to his struggle, remnant of one brave dog that had somehow avoided the silenced rounds of their best sniper.

"My zhdem zakazov. Oni skazali, chtoby derzhat' yeye slepoy. Yavl' yayetsya oruzhiyem."

(We wait for orders. They said to keep her blind. They said she is a weapon.)

"Some weapon." Yarov sneered, "the mutt deed worse..."

"The woman did not see, but she has told others. They are looking..."

This was told by another of the group, their communications expert

in the far corner.

"Vozmozhno ne bylo vremeni. Nam nuzhny sekrety teper!"

(We may not have time. We need the secrets now Dimitri!)

Yarov hefted the girl to her feet and dragged her over to the single, lonely stool that their second offered up as he finished connecting through the radio network and watched with interest.

"What will you do?" he asked. Yarov glared at him, dragging the black hood off of her and crouching down, making sure the knots across her wrists and feet were still tight.

Eyes, bloodred and haunting against a ghostly pale face. One eye slightly bruised and dried blood trailing across her upper lip, but otherwise she looked unharmed.

El couldn't focus, the face before her weary. Tired, her body slouched forwards and she was suddenly close to him. He was unfamiliar, he was dangerous...

"Where is the lab?" The man asked in as clear English as he could muster. "Where is Brenner? Where are the secret weapons?"

"Lab... corn field... Brenner... alive. He is in the lab..."

The few words she could muster came slowly, trickling out. Her body was just so tired, overused and undernourished...

"Weapons. Bombs. They cut atoms... they play God. Veles."

The four men gasped as the shivering little girl before them continued to pour out their government's secrets.

"Energy... they need... energy. They need more energy."

And with that she made her metaphorical exit, slumping into his shoulder and passing out.

Author's notes:

Russian spies have somehow made it to Hawkins Indiana and await their pickup. The guys back home have no idea what they're doing. El knows something of Slavic mythology when a month ago she'd never even heard of Jesus.

Maybe one day I'll explain further how we came to be in this situation. That day will not be today however, nor the next few chapters.

Happy 2017 everybody! Despite some of the rough patches, at least we got a seriously awesome show out of 2016 right?

34. Shadowplay

This... this wasn't how things were supposed to play out...

She shouldn't have had to be in this position once again. Curled up on the couch, phone in hand. Hair and clothes unkempt and dark eyes red rimmed from frustration.

He shouldn't have come back from the search party, even if his clothing was soaked through with rain and stained with mud. Even with his feet aching and blistered from hours and hours of trekking beside the thirty military trained agents ordered to find her, alive, at any cost.

There was a team of three set up beside Joyce, experienced radio technicians and a hostage negotiator. Brenner, it seemed, had pulled out all the stops to get their super weapon back.

The Byers household, on the outskirts of Hawkins and near the edge of their biggest (fifteen hundred acre) plot of woods, where they were likely holed up, was an ideal location to set up base. The authoritative bodies came and went every four hours, but for now, they emerged from white vans parked in the stretch of brown front yard.

Hop stood at the doorway, taking in the tense atmosphere. He wasn't privvy to the questioning glances by the agents in the corner, but too engrossed in Joyce and her solitary stance. The phone connected to a high powered radio was clutched so tightly, as if she feared they would take it from her.

It took a whole three minutes before she finally looked up. "Jim? Is there... did you find something?!"

She practically threw herself across the room while saying this. Into his waiting arms, neither caring to hide their dysphoria in that moment.

"Not yet. It turned into a monsoon, but we have men posted on high ground. They've got their eyes out for any movement."

"W-what about Jonathan? He l-left this morning and I-I still haven't heard-" Joyce found herself silenced by a gentle touch against her chapped lips. "He's with the Wheeler girl. They shouldn't be any trouble with his car still here. I drove over to check on Will, and they're doing okay."

She nodded against brazen knuckles, eyes closed. Her boys were okay, under the strict supervision of Karen, with a van parked outside just in case... in case they tried anything. If the adults had learned anything during the last year, it was that the kids were their own biggest endangerment.

So in quiet they sat, gazing into the grey of a stormy afternoon. While across town, much the same was happening with a group of four boys and two older teens.

"It's only been a day but... I already miss her... a lot."

No one expected these words from Lucas's mouth at all, let alone first, nevertheless they nodded in agreement. "Like Will's mom said though, we can't do anything without a lead." Mike reminded them.

The rain right after they found out she was missing didn't help, washing away the scant drops of blood and footprints to soak deeper into mulch coated forest ground.

"And with the feds outside, probably tracking this conversation as we speak..." Dustin commented, arms folded tightly as he relaxed on the three seater, closest to the door.

"We literally have no choice but to stay put until further notice, right?" Nancy finished, legs folded under her as she took up the other side of the couch with Mike in the middle. Scattered against the cluttered basement walls sat the other friends, minus Max who hadn't been seen since last night.

The rickety lawn chair, dubbed least favourite among the tabletop gamer group, gave little comfort, but Jonathan paid almost no attention to his numb backside. Beside him, Will's curled up fists and forward lean, chin tucked into his scrawny chest, were a more pressing concern. He wasn't usually so quiet in slumber, Jonathan

knew. Every night was a cacaphony of shifting sheets and the creak of neighbouring bed springs. Will was simply an active sleeper, so to see him like this...

"Will?" he asked, nudging the younger boy's shoulder. He didn't respond. Jonathan hooked an arm across his shoulders and shook him, but when he slumped extremely forward, only barely managing to be caught in time, the entire room went into uproar.

"Will?!" "Oh my god did he pass out?!" "Call an ambulance!" "I'll get mom!"

Mike left the group and rushed upstairs with Dustin close behind. Meanwhile the other three helped to lie Will across the sofa and Nancy took note of his vitals.

His heartbeat was irregular, fluttering and fast one second and faint the next. His breathing reflected this, both from his nose and mouth. And when she peered closely enough, the beginnings of red dripped down one nostril, eventually visible to Lucas and Jonathan.

He moaned in his sleep, arms drawn to his chest and simultaneously the lights all began flickering while the rain poured on.

"This isn't happening again... oh my god..." Lucas leapt up when the lights finally stayed off and the sound of static ceased. Upstairs Mr Wheeler loudly cursed while Mrs Wheeler came down carefully with the two boys in tow. "Let me see him!"

As a fully trained nurse on hold to raise her third child, Karen knew a few more things to check across the boy while Nancy rushed to bring the car around and Mr Wheeler grumbled, unaware of anything more than a powercut and the crying four year old in his arms.

His ill informed nature always came to use somehow, keeping high tensions at bay this time. One would almost call the smile and wave he gave the crowded car of wife and children dopey, for still unaware he would remain...

35. Day Of The Lords

"We're going on a trip first, Byers."

Famous last words, he thought, as one second the almost romantic park bench against desert ground and swamp air was pulled away by her like a tablecloth from under a dinner set.

The clouds split open and they came to a stop over a trail of dirt roads surrounding either side of a busy highway. It took a few minutes, but his knowledge on the geography of their state had never been too shabby. Not to mention it was the most frequented road in Indiana...

"What are we doing on the 65, Carrie?" Will asked in confusion.

He barely caught the edge of her gaze, intense scanning across the terrain widened when she caught her target and smiled like a cheshire cat. "Yesterday you asked me to help you get in El's head right?"

"Just to figure out her location-"

"I don't care why." She interrupted, stopping him short. "But I can't give you that power."

He sighed in annoyance, wanting to turn away but unsure of how when they were floating hundreds of feet in the air in corporeal bodies.

"Okay. So once again, what are we doing here?"

Their advantage had always been their diminutive size. Where most of their cartels accessed the flashy vehicles and heavy equipment only necessary in nuclear warfare, their unit specialised in human trafficking, and little more became necessary than the few guns needed to keep them in line. It was easy money, with almost always willing participants... well, drugged out to within an inch of their life...

But the people they brought in from the homeland, first by boat and

then a harmless looking tour bus that in fifteen years of operation had never once been pulled up, were as docile as cows. Most sought to creep their way into the US system and start a new life, away from the dictators of their old world. Away from the bloodstained soil of a war they had nothing to do with, taking place outside their homes... for god forbid the americans let the fighting they instigated touch their own lands...

It was the people they took that called for weapons and harsh orders. For strict adherence to maintain a persona of not about to be kidnapped and taken to be sold and marketed to a rich, foreign niche clientele in search of probably sex (but sometimes other duty) slaves.

The bus had passengers coming to, ready to make a stop on the empty side of the road with blinking hazard lights to indicate to other drivers they had a problem. According to plan, the passengers getting out to stretch their legs, none the wiser, would increase by five as their comrades slipped out of the forest and boarded.

Hawkins was less than twenty minutes away when the seemingly fine running highway turned into a high fatality collision and roll zone involving a bus careening into oncoming traffic.

The bus steered left for absolutely no reason, onlooking survivors and police later argued. But as soon as they crossed lanes, spinning out the car in centre lane beside them and flipping the six coming toward them, it was over.

One of the policemen, an unknown, unimportant man in his mid-30's with nondescript features designated to taping off the crash scene, would later go home and hug his wife and young children. In a hushed voice muffled between bedsheets he'd describe the eerie, shimmering outline of two small children, a boy and girl floating in the sky. The numerous deaths led him to believe the apparitions were victims, or perhaps angels sent to guide lost souls...